

Rituals of Death and Dying in Modern and Ancient Greece

Rituals of Death and Dying
in Modern and Ancient Greece:
Writing History from a Female Perspective

By

Evvy Johanne Håland

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

There is no unified universally accepted system for transliteration of written and spoken Greek. I have therefore devised my own, which, with a few exceptions in practical terms, is identical to the system used at the Nordic Library, Athens. However, when quoting from a published text, variations may occur since there are several different ways of transliterating Greek texts, such as the one adopted in Chapter 2 for the citation of printed pamphlets distributed by the various religious centres.

A	α	a
B	β	b
Γ	γ	g
Δ	δ	d
E	ε	e
Z	ζ	z
H	η	ē
Θ	θ	th
I	ι	i
K	κ	k
Λ	λ	l
M	μ	m
N	ν	n
Ξ	ξ	x
O	ο	o
Π	π	p
P	ρ	r
Σ	σς	s
T	τ	t
Y	υ	y
Φ	φ	ph
X	χ	ch
Ψ	ψ	ps
Ω	ω	ō

Αυ αυ au

Ευ ευ eu

Ου ου ou

γ before γ n

γ before κ n

´ h (in Ancient Greek)

When an author's name can be spelt in more than one way, I have followed the author's own spelling; if the author does not consistently use the same spelling, I have transcribed it following the aforementioned system. Exceptions to this practice include personal and place names or terms that have a well-established or standard Anglicised form, such as, Tinos, not Tēnos; Serres, not Serrōn; anastenaris, not anastenarēs. In general, though, Greek names are not Latinised with the letter c, which does not exist in the Greek alphabet. Sometimes I use C, as in Corfu and Cyprus, since those are standard Anglicised forms. When a term or name can be rendered in several ways, I have followed my own system, such as Agia, not Hagia, Ayia or Aghia. This mainly concerns Modern Greek, since Ancient Greek names and terms are more widely known in "European versions", such as Arrephoros. This is also the reason that I have marked the *spiritus asper* (´) with h on transcriptions from Ancient Greek, since, for example, hiera and hieros gamos are well-established spellings within ancient scholarship. Thus, with one exception, I have used the same system for Ancient Greek (A.Gr.) and Modern Greek (M.Gr.), although anthropologists may be critical of this usage, claiming I try to demonstrate that Modern Greek originates from Ancient Greek. For me, it has been a practical solution, given how closely related the two systems of orthography are. I have not used the Greek alphabet in the text, only in transliteration, hoping that this rule will be more appropriate for readers less accustomed to the Greek language. When a Greek term is first used, it is shown in italics.

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The central theme of this book is modern and ancient Greek death rituals seen from a gendered perspective, for which I have drawn on about thirty years of fieldwork, particularly in Greece, but also in Italy and other Mediterranean countries, as well as my studies of ancient Greek culture, which I first undertook in the late 1970s.

My interest in death rituals in general, and women's role in them in particular, started many years ago. To locate a specific point in time, my interest was awakened while doing fieldwork on religious saints' festivals and life-cycle passages or death rituals in Italy in 1987. Furthermore, women's role in these rituals came more and more to the forefront during an extended period of fieldwork in Greece between 1991 and 1992. More recently, my two-year research period as a Marie Curie Intra-European Fellow at the University of Athens from 2011 to 2013 gave me the financial resources to devote myself full-time to researching and writing. This included an excellent opportunity to conduct new and broader fieldwork on modern Greek death rituals and saints' festivals while also allowing me to carry out research in libraries and museums in the city in order to continue the project and write this book. My warm thanks to the EU's 7th Framework Programme for funding the research, and also to the Department of Archaeology and History of Art, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, for hosting the project. Particular thanks go to the technician Yannis Matzavakis for all his help in matters in which I am not a specialist, particularly in setting up a homepage for the project. I thank the staff at the Nordic Library in Athens for providing me with a wonderfully convenient office in the very room that houses the Greek part of the Loeb Classical Library—even though for me, as for others, the Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>) is becoming more and more practical to use—and assisting me in many practical matters. My thanks are also extended to the staff at the Norwegian Institute at Athens. A special thanks to Nancy Bolain, Project Officer, Research Executive Agency, Brussels, for all her help with practical details. Additionally, a special word of thanks to the Deputy Director at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, who opened up the closed-off vase section solely for my research purposes. Natassa Kastriti at the National Historical Museum of Athens also deserves special mention for her help.

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INTRODUCTION

Greece occupies a special position within the historical self-understanding of Europe. At the same time, it is situated geographically in the south-eastern corner of Europe, on “the border of the Orient”. Influenced by Edward W. Saïd’s *Orientalism* (1978), Michael Herzfeld has illustrated the way in which Europe has used Ancient Greece to create its own predecessor.¹ But what is it exactly that we understand by the term “Ancient Greece”?

For Europeans, Ancient Greece, i.e. the Athenian *polis* (city-state) of the fifth century BCE, is generally regarded as the cradle of Western, i.e. European civilisation, and the source of key concepts such as rationality and democracy. Throughout historical scholarship, the model most favoured has been that of the polis and its citizens, a public, male world that, in turn, makes the nation male. Is this what we mean when we speak of Ancient Greece?

On the other hand, northern European researchers working within the field of ancient Greek culture have shown relatively little interest in contemporary Greek culture due to the general thesis that it is a “backward society” related to the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Byzantium and Islam, i.e. the “Other”, motivating the question, why is this so?

Considering this tension, which is particularly strong in my own country of origin, Norway, I look at Ancient Greece from the perspective of the female domestic sphere in contemporary Greece, in which a focus on female values is central. Making use of everyday religion in general, and death rituals in particular as the most important source of evidence, this study will endeavour to discover what implications arise when we attempt a new understanding of Greek and south-eastern European history, including the ancient polis. Thus by comparing modern and ancient death rituals from a female perspective, I will try to supplement the generally male reading of the sources. Female versus male perspectives are also connected with gendered perceptions of history and time, which however, may merge in this geographical context. I have already developed this into a theory of female and male values, in that I have located two contradictory views both in ancient and modern male-produced sources.

¹ Saïd 1978; Herzfeld 1986, 1992.

By comparing them with the few surviving sources we possess from ancient women and with the values found in present-day society's female sphere, I have come to realise that these contradictory views present two distinct value-systems, one connected with the female sphere and another connected with the male sphere.² The current research develops my gynoinclusive perspective on the meanings assigned to rituals in both the ancient and modern world by examining their significance to modern women in conjunction with ancient texts.

Drawing on festivals and burials, which were studied extensively over the course of my fieldwork, as well as on ancient sources, this study examines the relationship between the death cult that revolves around mediators (or intermediaries) between the living and the dead in ancient and modern society as manifested through laments, burials, and ensuing memorial rituals. Since the practical performance of domestic rituals is and was in the hands of women, it is important to determine the extent of women's influence, throwing light in the process on the real power relations between women and men, which is particularly significant as men produced most of the ancient sources, and later scholars perpetuated their values. Consequently, by bringing ancient and modern worlds into mutual illumination, this study has relevance beyond the Greek context, both in time and space.

Although religious festivals dedicated to dead individuals and other death rituals are found in ancient and contemporary Greece, these festivals are not considered part of present-day northern and western European culture, while the "polis" has become paradigmatic of the "modern" culture. How has this come to pass? While traditional festivals and rituals have disappeared from most European cultures, those that have survived reasonably intact from antiquity are still important in the European peripheries, where many traditions co-exist, such as in the Mediterranean region and the Balkans. For western Europeans, these are often linked with "primitive" culture, everyday religion, emotions and "the female". At the same time, Europe is seen to be moving ahead, and is linked to "the (rational) male".

The Greek material under discussion is representative of the tension between the "primitive" Other and modern Europe. This study will hopefully provoke discussions that may illuminate the processes whereby such developments have evolved, while providing a framework for a broader contemporary self-understanding of Europe.

² Håland 2007a. See particularly Ch. 1 *infra* in which this theoretical and methodological approach is outlined.

In contrast to the northern part of Europe, we encounter rituals similar to the Greek death rituals studied here all over the Balkans and the eastern part of Europe. Parallel circumstances made evident by the importance of the veneration of the dead both in a public and domestic context in central Europe, the Balkans and the Mediterranean clearly show the importance of taking into account both the domestic and public, or female and male points of view in order to enhance our knowledge of European history as seen “from the grassroots”. The importance of conducting research on death rituals in contemporary Greece, i.e. at a crossroads of cultures on the margins of Europe, and of comparing them with ancient sources is evident now more than ever, as the field of South-eastern European and Mediterranean studies becomes increasingly important within comparative cultural historical research. It could be posited that this research is, in fact, crucial to the future of Europe because of the continuing expansion of the European Union, and particularly because of the southern crisis.

Since the value accorded by Greeks to the death cult is similar to that attributed to it by other eastern European and Balkan people, this study has relevance to research on Eastern Europe in general and southeast Europe in particular. The present study also taps into the increasing number of studies focusing on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary issues in the Mediterranean area.

In Greece, and all over eastern Europe, women have a prominent role in death rituals, which needs to be studied and understood in order to comprehend more fully society as a whole. The comparative study of women and death in Greece, then, opens up new perspectives on the social world, consequently increasing our understanding of cultural values and transition in Europe, because it combines questions and unites micro and macro levels. Death rituals are an important factor concerning cultural dynamics in general, and inheritance and identity in particular. The abundant resources found in Greece are particularly important for comparisons with countries in the eastern and southern parts of Europe, in the context of several older and more recent member states within the EU, where we encounter rituals similar to Greek death rituals. Key to such comparisons is cultural diversity, but also cultural similarities and values within the region, both gendered and non-gendered, such as popular versus official. This pertains also to the cultural diversity and heritage, religions, attitudes and values of the citizens of the EU. This study of the Greek case, then, attempts to shed fresh light on the wider European setting, thereby affording us new insights into European history.

Very often students coming from the eastern part of Europe to the western part to do their Ph.D. find that scientific staff do not have enough

knowledge about the eastern part of Europe to give them appropriate supervision. This also pertains to Norway and the rest of Scandinavia, where research into modern Greek culture is virtually non-existent, and no one is doing comparative research on the two periods. Although research into Balkan culture has assumed greater importance following the Balkan wars, the actual research undertaken mainly concerns Eastern and Central Europe and the Western Balkans after 1985, as illustrated by the workshop “Red-Letter Days in Transition” that took place at the University of Oslo in 2009. To understand the present, however, we must study the past, and rituals in particular link the past to the present and vice versa. We also learn that the political and ideological boundaries that have long divided Europe into Eastern and Western spheres, having placed Greece in the latter, is untenable. We learn this when taking on board the findings of researchers working in the field and setting them in a broad framework of history and prehistory.

The importance of the Greek “case” is obvious, since the Mediterranean area in general and Greece in particular offer a unique opportunity to pursue questions of continuity and change over very long spans of time, directly and not conjecturally, since we have a long literate—and archaeological—tradition that may be combined with the results of empirical fieldwork. One may also mention the new international initiative on intangible heritage, spearheaded by UNESCO. The present approach is important in providing new understandings of what Europe is in these multicultural times. The comparative historical analysis of women and death has important ramifications for current research related to the shaping of a “European identity”, the marketing of regional and national heritages, and associated activities. Regarding the present-day aim of connecting the various and quite different European heritages and developing a vision of Europe and its constituent elements that is at once global and rooted, this work is essential. This original kind of work is extremely important in allowing us better to understand the idea of a European cultural unity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, since to understand contemporary Europe as a whole we need to study the individual European societies comparatively. In this respect, the Greek material is unique, as we have extant sources dating from the pre-historical period to contemporary times. Thus, the present study seeks to be a contribution to women and gender research, anthropology, ancient and modern history and religious studies in a Greek, Norwegian, European and global context. In the recent debates about Mediterranean studies as a discipline and Mediterranean history as global history, the Greek topic has an important place, particularly so considering that the many parallels

between Greek death rituals and death rituals all over the world provide an interesting and important example of the global in the local. In this era of globalisation, then, the unique character of the Greek source material is of ever greater importance worldwide from a comparative approach, not only because it relates to the south-eastern European margin, but also to the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the Americas. The field of comparative cultural research should particularly be enhanced by this study, especially as religious ideologies are flowering in modern Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Balkan and Russian societies.

By identifying sources for the beliefs and rituals connected to women and death and by discussing gendered spaces, that is to say, public, mixed, domestic and private spheres, this study is of considerable relevance to Europe because it focuses on cultural and historical similarities, parallels as well as differences, instead of merely perpetuating the “othering” of immigrants seen particularly in northern but also in southern Europe.

This book aims to reach both the scientific and non-scientific milieus of those interested in Greek culture, ancient and modern. From a broader perspective, one may cite further associations, given the effects of Scandinavian tourism in Greece and immigrant groups in Scandinavia, some of whom may be inspired to find parallels with their own cultural heritage, often from the Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Balkan worlds. Needless to say, Greeks are also interested in this type of research: they want to learn how others see them, as well as how others view their ancient forerunners.

CHAPTER ONE

DEATH RITUALS AND THE CULT OF THE DEAD IN GREECE

From Death in General to Greek Women and Death in Particular

Little attention has been paid historically to the topic of “Greek Women and Death” from a gender perspective, where fieldwork is of central importance, and where the focus is on how we present the voices of our informants alongside the historical sources. Thus, the present volume fills a manifest gap. But, why do I study “Greek Women and Death”?¹

Death is crucial to the formation, manifestation, and elaboration of social structures and hierarchies. The death of a member of a society threatens its stability and the descendants’ performance; in particular, women’s performance of the necessary rituals before, during and after the burial rites incorporates a concern for the spiritual world and the ancestors as well as for the society in general. Hegel once wrote that history is the record of “what man does with death” because “the dead did not bury themselves”. Death lies beneath all facets of humanity, and is therefore a crucial factor in the development of societies.² The stability of society and the cosmos is not only threatened during a death but, conversely, death is also a means by which it is possible to encapsulate and grasp the dynamics that constitute both society and the cosmos. Death triggers reconstitutions of society and of the cosmos that invoke descendants and divinities alike. Both in earlier times and today, all over the world, we encounter peasant societies where the living are dependent on the deceased mediator’s successful communication with chthonic powers in order to assure the continuity of their own lives through the fertility of the earth.

¹ Parts of the following chapter were first published in Håland 2008a.

² Parker Pearson 2001: 203. These two quotations are borrowed from Bradley 1989 and Whaley 1981: 1 respectively. For the importance of death in relation to peoples’ reflections and social actions, see Goody 1975: 8.

Despite the significance of death, its pervasive role in the constitution of society has often been neglected, with some exceptions however. The most notable works on death were written many decades ago; some have also been reprinted, for example, Robert Hertz' *Death and the Right Hand* (1960), originally published in French in 1907. Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington's (eds.) *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* originally from 1979 (2nd ed., rev. 1991) examines the relationship with death and the handling of this period of crisis in the life cycle. Another important work reprinted several times is Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry's (eds.) *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (1982). More recent publications in the field of death include *The Buried Soul* by Timothy Taylor (2002), and *Death, Mourning, and Burial: a Cross-cultural Reader*, edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben (2004), although all the articles in this collection had been published elsewhere previously. Several studies on the cultures of death and dying deal with specific periods or places, such as Paul Binski's *Medieval Death* (1996), Sandra Gilbert's *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (2006), and *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*, edited by Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (2007). Nicola Denzey's *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Christian Women* (2007) deals with late antiquity, drawing mostly on Latin sources.

Apart from these studies, mortuary rituals are often touched upon in ethnographies, although little emphasis has been put on death as a process of transformation by which society and the cosmos are created. Death rituals and celebrations of new social structures can be seen as an opportunity to renegotiate and recreate society and the social order. By using death, gender and women's values as analytical entrances as well as empirical case studies, it is possible to use an often underestimated category of data in order to shed new light on deep traditional and resilient processes in society that encompass the relationship between man and woman within the family, the household and the village, the town, city and state. Hence, a study of gender, women and death opens up new perspectives on the social world while also increasing our understanding of contemporary transitions in Europe in that it combines, questions and unites micro- and macro-levels.

Among the growing though divided scholarship on the ancient Greek material, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, in her book, *"Reading" Greek Death: To the End of the Classical Period* (1995), discusses Greek mortuary practice as a system of behaviour based on cultural attitudes from Homer and archaic grave monuments via later mostly written but also visual sources until the end of the classical period. However, she

omits a significant amount of archaeological evidence in her eagerness to distance herself from Ian Morris' *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (1992), since his analysis of mortuary data based on excavated remains of burials rejects what he sees as limiting text and object-based approaches. The present study does not pick a side to follow within this divided scholarship on literary versus material sources, but seeks instead to use both. It also argues for the importance of changing our northwestern European approach when studying both ancient and modern Mediterranean societies, where one does not necessarily encounter the same frame of reference and values as found in northern Europe. This means that regardless of how many or of which categories of sources we apply when reading or reconstructing ancient society, they will not uncover anything about ancient society without our knowing what questions we should ask the sources. The sources give us the possibility of interpreting ancient society, not of entering it: ancient society exists only in our minds, because the sources are signs from another cultural context and not identical to it. That the surviving Greek literary texts were written for a small elite, as Morris has argued, and that the authors such as, for example Plato, Aristotle and Euripides were intellectuals and thus did not represent the majority of people is true; but all the written sources from antiquity are the product of intellectuals. The intellectuals were also part of the society in which they lived, revealed "implicit" concepts in their work, and were therefore guided by a common mentality.³ This also holds for much of the archaeological material, since, for example, funerary markers are also constructed, or raised, to communicate a message.⁴ The salient question here is from which perspective should this message be understood, the northern or the Mediterranean part of Europe? This crucial issue becomes more acute when we try to deal with both men and women, and their relationships with death, since the former produced most of the sources, while the latter seems to have had a central role in connection to death rituals.⁵

Several scholars have examined death, moving from the study of death to its association with the social order and vice versa, claiming that to

³ Håland 2007a: Ch. 1.

⁴ See, for example, Closterman 2007: 633-652. For anthropology and archaeology of death, see, for example, Humphries and King, eds. 1981.

⁵ Béchech 2013 is also relevant for this study; however, despite it being a recent study building on her dissertation, there are two problems: firstly, it presents an outdated view on the relationship between magic and religion (10) and secondly, although it is an important topic within gender studies, only men are considered within the study.

examine death is to look at society through female eyes.⁶ The topic of “Women and Death” in general has been explored in Western thought and literature. Historical perspectives on the representation of Greek women, also in connection with death, have equally been investigated.⁷ Margaret Alexiou has attested the strong position of the lament in Greek tradition from antiquity via the Byzantine era to contemporary society. Following Alexiou, several researchers have also investigated the topic of lament in the ancient and modern periods. Most publications on themes related to women and death have indeed focused on lament, often through documentation of the condemnation of the practice of female lamentation, particularly in modern and ancient Greece.⁸ The arguments of these studies will be questioned in this work. Likewise, it is my intention to show that not only are laments important in connection with death, but the same importance is also illustrated by other elements of death rituals in the Greek context, such as meals and food offerings at the tombs and their ingredients; the importance of a series of commemorative ceremonies after the burial involving gifts; days dedicated to the dead and various symbols such as statues, pictures and bones.

Festivals and Rituals Connected with Death

In my book, *Greek Festivals, Modern and Ancient: A Comparison of Female and Male Values*, published in 2007, the main focus was on the fertility cult. The present study draws on the same methodology, i.e. using modern sources in conjunction with ancient ones, while here I focus on the death cult.

Among the modern festivals analysed in my aforementioned book, we find the two most important Pan-Hellenic death festivals. As the ritual celebrated on 15 August is called *Ē Koimēsis tēs Theotokou* (the “Dormition” or “Falling Asleep” of the Bearer or Mother of God), the Greek name of the festival already suggests a connection with death. The Virgin’s death or “Dormition” is followed by her burial, or the “9th day’s ritual of the Panagia” on 23 August, thus reflecting ordinary death rituals and the subsequent memorial service (Fig. 1). We encounter the same phenomenon in the Orthodox Easter festival dedicated to the “Death and Resurrection of Christ”. Also among the ancient festivals, we encounter two that are

⁶ Seremetakis 1991 vs. Ariès 1983b (or. 1977).

⁷ Seremetakis 1993. Western thought and literature: Bassein 1984.

⁸ Alexiou 1974 (2nd edition 2002); Holst-Warhaft 1992; Loraux 1990, 2002. Recent works dealing with laments include Saunders 2007; Suter 2008; Psychogiou 2008.

particularly connected with the death cult, the *Adōnia*, dedicated to the vegetation God Adonis, and the Dionysian *Anthesteria*, which was also the festival of the ancestors, during which it was believed that the spirits of the dead returned temporarily.



Figure 1. The “9th day’s ritual of the *Panagia* (the Virgin Mary)” starts on the eve of 23 August, Tinos, 1995.

Death rituals are first and foremost rites of passage, and Greek death rituals very often seem quite foreign, bizarre and “exotic” to people from the north of Europe and the US. The difference between a familiar “us” and an exotic “them” is a major barrier to achieving a meaningful understanding of the world of the Other. This obstacle can be overcome, however, if we are willing to participate in the world of the Other⁹ and this can best be achieved through fieldwork. These reflections are very much influenced by Loring M. Danforth’s study of the death rituals of modern rural Greece, published in 1982, because his assessments parallel many of my own experiences and thoughts in connection with my own fieldwork

⁹ Danforth 1982: 5, 32 f.

on death rituals in Greece, which started some years after the publication of Danforth's book.¹⁰

The validity of comparing ancient and modern Greek death rituals may generally be explained by the French structuralist P. Ariès' theory, which contends that political and ideological changes have had an important effect on Western attitudes towards death. He argues that such changes occur at an unconscious level. In other words, we change our attitudes toward death intuitively rather than consciously. In a passage discussing "The social function of the cemetery", he illustrates how prohibitions from the councils regarding meetings taking place at several French cemeteries in the medieval period were unsuccessful, stating that no theoretical consideration, no legal or moral authority could prevent the cemetery from serving as a meeting place so long as people felt the need to come together.¹¹ Influenced by the historian Fernand Braudel, Ariès analysed the cultural construction of the death rituals under the paradigm of *la longue durée*, since death rituals constitute a deep-seated structure within social life.¹² This means that ideological changes do not necessarily provoke changes in fundamental beliefs or long-lasting *mentalities*, in my terminology. With regard to using "our" own modern cult of tombs as a comparative tool with the ancient, this topic has also been investigated by

¹⁰ Influenced by Geertz 1973: 142 f.; Crick 1976 and Lévi-Strauss 1966: 238 f., Danforth 1982: 27 f. argues for a semiotic approach to those "clusters of meaning" which shape our experiences and make the world around us understandable. However, Danforth's universal image, created by participant observation, in many ways cracks because the consequence of these reflections is that he refutes a particular scholarly treatment of the mourning process, a subject that will be discussed later in this study. Since he lets the death of the cultural Other become a privileged instance of cross-cultural connections which may transcend superficial cultural divisions, we meet a paradoxical statement from a "Western" researcher who in another context has been eager to carry out western cultural critiques, cf. Håland 2007a: Ch. 2 for discussion of Danforth 1984. Accordingly, Danforth's study may be regarded as an ethnocentric reading of the sources, which is, unfortunately, not a new phenomenon. We meet the same problem in relation to archaeological sources, as stated by Whitley 1991: 195, see also 32, 67 f., who is also reluctant to accept universal grammars. However, Danforth may also be compared with the holistic view of Bloch 1988: 26-28, who likewise sees similarities between "exotic" peoples and our own society and therefore the "Others" do not appear as foreign as they were for Hertz 1907 and for Seremetakis 1991: 2.

¹¹ Ariès 1983b: 69. In another study, Ariès 1983a, he also discusses the attitudes towards death from a historical perspective, focusing on changes in mentalities, but his analysis, unfortunately, is very schematic.

¹² Ariès 1983b, cf. Braudel 1969: 41-83, 1990.

R. Garland,¹³ but as mentioned already, it is not necessarily relevant as a comparative tool with the Greek context, which is, after all, quite different from northwestern European contexts and more similar to modern eastern European and other Mediterranean realities. In these areas, people still carry out rituals similar to those of their ancient predecessors despite changes in lifestyle, technology and culture. So although one may, of course, profit from using theoretical material from other researchers, including Ariès' aforementioned study of medieval cemeteries, the contemporary comparative research basis needs to be more oriented towards the southeastern part of Europe. This may be illustrated by the following quotation from Ariès: "In 1231, the Council of Rouen prohibited dancing in the cemetery or in the church under pain of excommunication." In modern Greece however, people may still dance in the cemetery.¹⁴ It is crucial to undertake deeper analyses that are, in turn, critical of and redefine Western ideology's official understanding of death, because we encounter problems when trying to apply such an understanding categorically to the Greek material.¹⁵

Bridging a Cultural Divide to Situate the Context

How is it possible to make a comparison between religious rituals in modern and ancient Greece, despite a gap of two millennia between the two cultures? Ancient and modern rural Greece represent two peasant societies, inhabiting the same landscape, with the same climate and almost the same technological level. The two societies demonstrate strong similarities in culture, social organisation and folk religion, which relate to the economic base of the community—agriculture. These are important factors in the recent debates about Mediterranean Studies as a discipline.¹⁶

The analogy between ancient and modern Greek farmers is not far-fetched. I have already discussed the survival of values and beliefs, in spite of the introduction of new normative religions and the close relationship between the official Orthodox religion and popular religion, particularly in the rural parts of Greece.¹⁷ Since attitudes toward death seem to be very similar in modern and ancient Greece, it is fruitful to look at society from the cemetery or from the institutions of death: through the "optic offered

¹³ Garland 1985: 118 f.; Ariès 1983a: 68 ff.

¹⁴ Personal information from E. Alexakēs. Cf. Ariès 1983b: 69.

¹⁵ See also Bloch 1988: 11-29.

¹⁶ Cf. Horden and Purcell 2008; Harris 2006 and the argument in Håland 2005, cf. 2007a.

¹⁷ Cf. Håland 2005, 2007a: Ch. 3. See also du Boulay 2009 for long continuities.