

Burial Customs, a Guide for Families of Hellenic Reconstructionist Followers

by Melissa Gold, from a clergy education assignment. April 24, 2023

This pamphlet is to help you plan a funeral for a family member who followed Hellenic Reconstruction as a spiritual pathway. The steps below incorporate the ancient traditions into general modern practices for a funeral *in Ontario*. We encourage our followers to pre-plan their funerals, to attach guidelines to their wills and to talk to executors and to you, their family members, about their wishes before they pass. They may have done this. But if not, the guidelines below will help you know what to do or expect.

What follows is a guide to Hellenic funerals by day, so that you know the steps you need to follow to provide for your loved ones in the way they would have wanted.

Note: some steps include details that are valid for the Province of Ontario. Laws in your jurisdiction may vary. Please research the relevant laws for your area before creating a directive.

Day 1. The day that your loved one passes away.

- First, ensure that the person's eyes are closed. If you are not present for the death, you can ask that whoever is with the deceased do this.
- Summon a doctor, emergency services or coroner to confirm the death and provide the Certificate of Death.
- Complete a Statement of Death in order to obtain a Burial Permit. If you are handling the paperwork yourself, you need to look after this before the burial; otherwise, the funeral home will look after this.
- Prepare the body. You may prefer that the Funeral home do this, and that's acceptable. If preparing the body at home, do so after the Death Certificate is signed. Wash the body and rub it with scented oil or myrrh. Then dress it in white shrouds (Cindea.ca gives directions for making and wrapping a shroud, but leave face uncovered for visitation).
- Place a wreath of gold, silver, bronze, or seasonal flowers on the deceased's head.
- You may place a coin in the deceased's mouth (fare paid to Charon), but remove it before cremation, if cremation is the burial choice.
- Before moving the body (to go to the funeral home for visitation or for burial), place a white linen cloth over the face or pull the shroud over the head.
- In Ontario, you are NOT required to embalm and, as the practice did not exist in ancient times, it is not traditional to embalm.
- These steps are to be followed no matter how your loved one died. There is no distinction made for suicides, for example. If a police investigation is required, start the steps at the time the police release the body (viewing may not be allowable in that situation).

Day 2. A single day of lying in repose, in ancient times called *πρόθεσις* (prothesis) and often referred to as "visitation" today.

- Lying in repose may occur at home or at a funeral home. (We do not do this for young infants.)
- Whatever room that the deceased will be lying in should be large enough to accommodate visitors.
- If the deceased will be lying in repose at a funeral home, you can rent a coffin for the day of prothesis. The casket is usually open.
- The bier or coffin should be positioned so that the feet of the deceased point toward the door (folk lore explains this as making sure the spirit of the person knows where they are going and not where they have been so they will not try to return).
- Place a bowl of water and towels at the entrance to the room (or house) so that people may ritually wash their hands as they exit to remove miasma.
- Place bunches of oregano or sweet marjoram under the casket and, if possible, small bottles of olive oil and aromatic oils.
- Honey cakes or gingerbread are offered to visitors.
- Encourage people to talk about the deceased and not trivial topics.
- Lamentation and grieving may be explicit but do not need to be excessive. Personal prayers can be created for the occasion.

Day 3. Day of the *ἐκφορά* (ekphora) procession and *κηδεία* (keedeea) funeral rites.

- Burial should occur on Day 3. If burial must be delayed, some means of preservation may be needed after Day 2.
- Burial may be by inhumation (interment) or cremation.

The procession for inhumation:

- In ancient times, a procession went on foot from the house of the deceased to the cemetery. In modern times, the procession might be reduced to the walk from the hearse to the burial plot.
- The procession may include musicians but that is not required. Permission from the cemetery may be required for musicians. Confirm this in advance.
- The procession is led by women carrying two ceramic vessels containing liquids called *χοές* (khoes). One khoē contains a mix of wine and water and the other a mix of wine, water, oil, honey, and milk. Khoes are poured by setting the vessel on the ground and tipping it over so that the liquid flows out.

- Another woman carries a basket of other ritual items, including seasonal (or favourite) fruit, incense, charcoal, a censer, and matches. Pallbearers carry the coffin behind the musicians, if any, and family and friends follow.

The funeral rites:

- The funeral rite consists of grave-side prayers with burning of incense and tipping out of the wine and water khoues to various Hellenic deities, as well as a farewell to the deceased and eulogies (speeches). You may create your own script for this.
- The burial plot should be situated such that the deceased can be buried with his or her head facing east or west (rising or setting sun). Arrange this ahead of time with the cemetery.
- After the ritual but before the grave is filled, it is traditional to throw barley into the grave, as well as flowers and an olive wreath and, if allowed by the cemetery, small prized possessions of the deceased (alternately, these can be placed in the coffin before it is closed).
- Eulogies take place around the grave, each one followed by a khoue of the wine, water, oil, honey and milk mixture, and the lighting of additional incense.
- When all is said, the mourners should assist the family in filling the grave. Make sure the cemetery will allow this.
- The ceramic vessels holding the khoues are then broken on the grave mound and the grave is covered with olive branches, if available.
- Before the mourners leave the cemetery, they wash their hands in a basin of water perfumed with rose water or myrrh that has been set up away from the burial.
- The contents of the wash basin is poured out in the cemetery, preferably just west of the grave, while saying this Modern Greek phrase: *Καθαρισμός για σένα, όπως σου πρέπει και σου αρμόζει* [ka-thar-MOS yah SE-na, OH-pos sou PRE-pee keh sou ar-MO-zee] (http://www.labrys.gr/gr/text_kidefsi.html)

Funeral rites for a cremation:

- If the ashes are to be buried in a cemetery, the procession and ritual is similar to the above, with the additional step of having the body taken from the deceased's home or the funeral home to the crematorium. The family can take the ashes in a container of their choice to the cemetery and the procession would begin at their car instead of the hearse. This should also take place on Day 3 but can be later.
- If the deceased chose to have his or her ashes scattered, the funeral ritual should take place at the location of the scattering, if possible.
- If scattering is to happen much later, the funeral ritual described above should be held on Day 3 and does not have to take place at a cemetery.

- Khoes should be poured onto the earth but if the funeral is held indoors, tip khoes into a receiving vessel that is emptied later onto the earth. Offerings should be left outside where they will not be disturbed. Khoē vessels should be broken and left where ashes are scattered, if possible, or just buried, broken or whole.

Funeral dinner:

- The funeral dinner occurs after the funeral on Day 3.
- Burn incense during the meal.
- If the dinner takes place at home, after the dinner, sweep up all crumbs that have fallen on the table and floor and sprinkle these crumbs on the grave or scattering site later.
- If the dinner is held at a restaurant, gather up at least some crumbs from the tables to sprinkle on the grave or scattering site later.
- The family bathes upon returning to the house.
- The day after the funeral, sweep up any remaining crumbs or particles on the floor of the house and clean the house symbolically with sea water (salt water) and an aromatic substance, such as incense, rosemary oil, sulphur, oregano oil or even tea tree oil.

Day 9. Day of the *Enata* (Ninth Day) rites.

- Family and very close friends hold a ritual in honor of the deceased at the graveside or scattering site on the ninth day after death.
- Set flowers, boiled barley and pomegranate on the grave (the living do NOT eat any of these).
- Tip khoes of water and honey to the deceased and burn incense of evergreens.
- Before leaving, all present wash their hands in a bowl of water perfumed with rose water or myrrh, which is poured out in the cemetery, preferably just west of the grave.
- Hold a dinner immediately afterward.

Day 30. Day of the *Triakas* (Thirtieth Day) Rites

- Family and very close friends hold a ritual in honor of the deceased at the graveside on the thirtieth day after death.
- Place flowers and honey cake or cake made with milk on the grave.
- Tip khoes of red wine and hydromel (mead) to the deceased and burn incense of evergreens
- Before leaving, all present wash their hands in a bowl of water perfumed with rose water or myrrh, which is poured out in the cemetery, preferably just west of the grave.
- This is the end of the official mourning period.

Erecting the tomb monument.

- This can occur any time prior to the first anniversary of death.
- The tomb stone may have a modern shape or may be reminiscent of ancient stones.
- Images of the deceased may be depicted on the tomb as well as epigraphs or quotes from ancient texts.
- Plant flowers should at the monument if the cemetery allows.
- At each visit, you may leave tokens in memory of the deceased.
- Tokens usually include flowers or wreathes of myrtle.
- You may also leave small offerings of food (but visitors do not eat these).
- Tie ribbons of blue, green, vermilion, black, purple or brown around the monument like a sash with the fringed ends hanging down.

First anniversary of the death.

- Although we don't know the practice in ancient times, followers of the gods in modern Greece have a custom of honoring the deceased on the first anniversary of their death.
- As at the 9th Day and 30th Day observances, place offerings of flowers, boiled barley and pomegranate on the grave and tip out koes of red wine, olive oil, milk and honey.
- Before leaving, all present wash their hands in a bowl of perfumed water, which is poured out in the cemetery, preferably just west of the grave.
- Thereafter, honor the deceased every year on their birthday. Alternatively, you can honor your loved one at the Genesios observance.

Genesios. Annual memorial.

- Occurring on the 5th day of the Athenian month of Boedromion, Genesios was a festival in honour of the dead in ancient Athens. You can honor your family member and all ancestors on this day.
- Today, Genesios is an occasion to remember the deceased, to hear and tell stories about them and what they did, and to look through family albums or create them.
- If the graves of these deceased family members and ancestors are nearby, visit them and perhaps lay flowers or bring small offerings or libations (of water, milk, or honey).

And may they worship forever the gods who possess the land with native honors of laurel bough held aloft, and oxen slain, even as their fathers did before their time. Since reverence for parents stand written third among the statues of Justice, to whom honor supreme is due. Suppliant Women (lines 703-8)

Check the Hellenion calendar (found at www.hellenion.org/calendar) to learn what English calendar date Genesios falls on, as each year it will be a different English date.

Prayers for funeral, 9th Day, 30th Day and One Year Anniversary can be found in *Hellenic Polytheism: Household Worship* (153-154, 156).

Words of Comfort: Beliefs about the Afterlife

The distinctive feature of Hellenic funerals is that they are about taking the right actions to honor the deceased. A secondary function is to ensure that miasma (pollution from exposure to death) is purified, not necessarily to avoid negative influences from the deceased or from the spiritual world. Removing miasma also shows honor to the deceased and sets a boundary between life and death. This also helps mourners to complete their relationship with the deceased and move on.

Ancient Athenians did not have dogmatic beliefs about the afterlife. Generally, they expected that their deceased loved ones would be led by Hermes Psychopomp (guider of souls) to the Gates of Hades, where the deceased would spend eternity in the god's dim halls. The afterlife offered neither respite from a difficult life nor punishment for wrongs committed in life. If anything, the ancients believed the gods punished mortals *in life* when the person failed to do the right thing toward the gods or did the wrong thing, showing a lack of respect, piety and friendship (see Garland p 48 ff).

The Homeric era appears to have held a depressing view of the afterlife, since Achilles in the *Odyssey*, Book 11, says: "Say not a word ... in death's favour; I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man's house and be above ground than king of kings among the dead" (lines 486-491). Book 11 depicts the dead as "strengthless, witless wraiths, uttering thin bodiless shrieks as they flit to and fro in the shadowy house of Hades" (Guthrie p 149). But by the Classical era, people held a variety of beliefs, including that the soul disappears altogether or that the soul travels to the heavens, a view espoused by Plato. Plato also talked about reincarnation (metempsychosis), although that was not a widely held view at the time (Garland p 62-63). However, a major belief system about death seems to have derived from the Eleusinian Mysteries.

To those who underwent initiation at the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Homeric Hymn II to Demeter promises, "Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom" (lines 480-4820). In other words, the non-initiate could expect only the dark and gloom of the Homeric era. But something happier and brighter awaited those who were initiates. Exactly what that is, we don't know, as this was secret information. Nilsson has an idea that the mysteries, based "on the foundation of the old agrarian cult," offered "a hope of immortality and a belief in the eternity of life, not for the individual but for the generations which spring one from another. Thus, also, there was developed ... a morality of peace and good will, which strove to embrace humanity in a brotherhood without respect to state allegiance and civil standing. The hope and the belief and the morality were those of the end of the archaic age" (p 63).

One obvious conclusion is that those who were not initiated were not punished (other than missing out on the good things in Hades); simply, initiates received a promise of good things to come. In other words, says Mylonas, "We may assume that the fortunes of Demeter and

Persephone symbolized the vegetation cycle—life, death, and life again: "The sprouting of the new crop is a symbol of the eternity of life" and experiencing the mysteries granted initiates "confidence to face death and a promise of bliss in the dark domain of Hades whose rulers became his protectors and friends through initiation" (282).

Unfortunately, no one today can be initiated in the Eleusinian Mysteries. What that means for members of Hellenion (and other reconstructionist Hellenic movements) is that our members are free to espouse whatever beliefs serve them. They may believe in reincarnation, in one life followed by an eternity in Hades (blissful or gloomy), or even that the "soul" or consciousness simply ceases to exist upon death.

We encourage members to leave "words of comfort" for their loved ones in their wills and funeral plans attached to the will. If they believed that the soul ceases to exist, they might have left a homily about pursuing virtue or overcoming obstacles and how much they appreciated that you were part of their lives. If they believed in reincarnation, they might have written words about how you will perhaps meet again after death or in another lifetime. And if they believed in one life followed by an eternity of bliss, they might have let you know their positive views about eternal communion with Persephone and her lord. The member decides what to say. In all forms of belief about the afterlife in Hellenic spirituality, one thing we agree on is that there is no widely held belief system of punishment nor requirements for salvation. In fact, beliefs about the afterlife are a very minor part of Hellenic spirituality (Garland p 48). We spend most effort in living a life of virtue, respecting the gods, and building and upholding family and community so that people can prosper.

And for those who survive, we keep our loved ones alive by speaking their name and remembering their virtues and gifts to us in life. We remember them.

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Note: Relevant legal obligations in Ontario can be found at <https://www.ontario.ca/page/what-do-when-someone-dies#section-4>.