

## BOOK REVIEW

*Rituals of Death and Dying in Modern and Ancient Greece: Writing History from a Female Perspective.* By EVY JOHANNE HÅLAND. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. Pp. xvii + 672. Hardcover, \$125.99. ISBN 1443861278.

Reactions to death and dying are culture-specific and typically vary according to both time and place. There are, however, regional instances in which continuity is clearly present and critical aspects of ancient funerary practices persist into the modern period. This phenomenon has been observed most notably in Japan and rural Greece.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on Greece, Håland's ambitious monograph seeks to highlight commonalities in mortuary rituals over time and interpret them within a broader socio-cultural framework.

Approaching the subject from a feminist perspective, Håland combines evidence from ancient Greek literary sources with the results of ethnographical fieldwork in order to discern patterns and points of continuity between ancient and modern funerary rituals in Greece. Grounded on the premise that "people [in some areas of Greece] still carry out rituals similar to those of their ancient predecessors despite changes in lifestyle, technology and culture" (12), the author compares rituals associated with religious festivals and mortuary rites to study the complex relationship between ritual and society and the ways in which rituals can reflect gender relations.

The book is organized into nine thematic chapters in which ancient and modern evidence is presented in a parallel fashion. Chapter 1 is foundational, describing death rituals and the cult of the dead in Greece. Primarily informed by

<sup>1</sup> E.g., L.M. Danforth. 1982. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; A. Bernstein. 2006. *Modern Passings: Death Rites, Politics, and Social Change in Imperial Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. Note that key works concerning ancient Greek funerary practices include D.C. Kurtz and J. Boardman. 1971. *Greek Burial Customs*. London: Thames and Hudson; R. Garland. 2001. *The Greek Way of Death*, reprint. London: Garland Duckworth and Company; I. Morris. 2003. *Burial and Ancient Society: The Rise of the Greek City-State*, reprint. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and M.S. Mirto. 2012. *Death in the Greek World: From Homer to the Classical Age*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

ethnographical fieldwork, Chapter 2 focuses on the festivals of modern saints, while Chapter 3 furthers the discussion and incorporates ancient material into its treatment of the cults of saints, heroes, heroines, and other “exceptional” dead.

Chapters 4 through 8 explore aspects of mortuary practices and eschatological beliefs in ancient and modern contexts. Respectively, these chapters cover laments and burials, tombs and gifts for the dead, the cult of bones, the cult of the deceased mediators, and communication between the living and the dead. The final chapter, Chapter 9, contains diachronic reflections on gender and death in Greece and posits their broader cross-cultural implications. In particular, Håland maintains that funerary rituals performed for the dead and official ideological rituals (e.g. those associated with religious festivals) are, and have always been, mutually influential and often gender-specific. The monograph concludes with a glossary of key Greek terms used throughout the text.

The book is most valuable for its clear presentation of primary ethnographical research and careful, thought-provoking comparisons of modern and ancient Greek funerary rituals. However, for the scholar of antiquity, there are some sweeping generalizations and over-simplifications of ancient customs which detract from the efficacy of the narrative. For example, “Greek religious festivals are most commonly dedicated to a dead person, or, in the case of the ancient festivals, to a dead person together with a God or Goddess, often a vegetation deity” (16). A cursory survey of Athenian religious festivals would reveal that many festivals are not linked to either the dead or fertility deities, such as the Chalkeia in honor of Hephaistos, the Mounychia in honor of Artemis, and the Dipolieia in honor of Zeus.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, the author also claims that “throughout ancient Greek history, customs related to women’s rituals in the sphere of death cult were condemned” (18). This is strong, misleading language. Presumably, the author is referencing the Athenian legislative reforms of Solon (ca. early 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE). Although Solon imposed some limitations on female mourners (e.g. only females over age 60 and close relatives could participate in key funerary rituals and women were prohibited from histrionic displays of grief, such as lacerating their cheeks and singing generic, standardized dirges), women still played a substantial, if not crucial, role in Greek funerary rituals. Most notably, they washed and prepared the body to lie-in-state (the *prothesis*), sang personalized laments at the bier, followed the

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed treatment of Athenian religious festivals, see E. Simon. 1983. *Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Commentary*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

body in procession to the gravesite, and tended to the grave after the interment of the body. Indeed, the intent of the Solonian reforms was not to marginalize women, but rather to deter rampant conspicuous consumption and elite rivalry.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, these minor errata should not diminish the value of Håland's interdisciplinary work, which is a substantial contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on Greek funerary rituals, gender studies, and ethnography in Greece.

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<sup>3</sup> For ancient sources on Solonian funerary reforms, see Demosthenes 43.62; Plutarch *Solon* 21.5–8; Cicero *de Legibus* 2.59, 64). For more scholarship on funerary legislation, including differing opinions regarding the intent and functions of Solonian reforms, see L. Frisone. 2000. *Leggi e regolamenti funerari nel mondo greco. I. Le fonti epigrafiche*. Lecce: Università di Lecce, Scuola di Specializzazione in Archeologia Classica e Medioevale; J.H. Blok. 2006. "Solon's Funerary Laws: Questions of Authenticity and Function," in *Solon of Athens: New Historical and Philological Approaches*, edited by J.H. Blok and A.P.M.H. Lardinois, 197–247. Leiden: Brill.