

10 The Dead

(a) Funeral customs

What happens to humans after they die? People have always been fascinated by this question. Many believe that there is a life after death. Some experts believe that they can actually contact and speak to the spirits of this after-life. Belief in the after-life is not new—it is thousands of years old.

The people of Ancient Egypt believed so strongly in a life after death that they preserved the bodies of the dead. This was so that the soul of the dead man could recognize its original body in the next world. A body preserved by the Egyptians is called a mummy.

The Ancient Greeks also believed in a life after death. Although they did not preserve the body like the Egyptians or have such elaborate burial customs, they were still very careful that the dead body was disposed of in the proper way, with great respect and due funeral rites.

The body was washed and dressed in normal, everyday clothes. A coin was placed in the mouth and, after a short period of 'lying in state' when people came to pay their last respects, the body was carried away on a cart or on the shoulders



A mummified cat

Skeleton with a coin in his mouth





A gold funeral mask from Mycenae

A funeral urn



of friends, while the mourners followed. Sometimes the body was buried in the ground or placed in a stone tomb. Valuable gifts and possessions of the dead man were buried with the body, and occasionally, especially among the early Greeks such as those in the great city of Mycenae, a gold death-mask might be placed over the face of a dead king. Several such masks were found by archaeologists at Mycenae. Tombs were usually marked with a simple stone slab on which there was a short inscription.

At other times the Greeks burned or cremated the dead. The body was placed on a funeral pyre, along with gifts and possessions of the dead person. The pyre was then set alight and the body was burned. The ashes were collected in a small vase or urn.

Whatever methods the Greeks used, they considered it vitally important that the body should receive some form of burial ceremony, even if it were just three handfuls of earth scattered over the body as a token of burial. Without such a ceremony the soul of the dead man could not cross over to the after-life but was forced to roam this earth, an unhappy ghost. Only criminals and other unpopular people were left unburied.

Things to do

Use the heading *Funeral Customs*. Underline. Answer these questions in sentences.

- 1 Did the ancient Greeks believe in a life after death?
- 2 How did the Greeks dispose of dead bodies? Describe the two methods.
- 3 Why did the Greeks consider it vitally important for the dead to be buried properly?

Now draw and colour the mask from Mycenae. Say what it was used for.

(b) Land of the Dead

After the ceremony of burial or cremation had been properly carried out, the souls of the dead were led by Hermes to the entrance of the Underworld, the Land of the Dead. This land



Charon rowing boat across the Styx

lay deep beneath the earth and was ruled over by King Hades and his reluctant queen Persephone. After reaching the entrance, Hermes led them down a dark tunnel to the river Styx. There they paid Charon, the old, bearded ferry-man, to row them across, using the coins which relations had placed beneath the tongues of their corpses. Sailors, who might be drowned at sea, far from their homes with no relations to place a coin beneath their tongue, carried their fee for Charon in the form of a piece of gold made into an ear-ring. After crossing the Styx, the dead became ghosts. Those with no coin were left to shiver forever on the riverbank. Some who had escaped from Hermes might succeed in creeping down to the Underworld through a back entrance where no fee was charged, but this entrance was very difficult to find.

On the other side of the river Styx, the main entrance to Hades' dark kingdom was guarded by an enormous three-headed dog called Cerberus. This monster was always awake and on watch. He let no ghosts escape from the dark realm and prevented any mortal still alive from entering.

The ghosts were first sent to the three judges of the dead: Rhadamanthys, who judged the souls from the east; Aeacus

Cerberus





The three judges of the dead

who judged those from the west; and Minos, who passed judgment on all the difficult cases.

Those whose lives had been neither very good nor very bad were sent to the Asphodel Fields, a place where the ghosts wandered endlessly, twittering like bats, with nothing to do.

Those who had been very good were sent to Elysium (or The Elysian Fields), a paradise land of meadows and orchards where the sun was always shining. There was no rain or cold. Flowers never withered and fruit was always in season. Games, music and fun never stopped.

The very bad people, like criminals, were sent to Tartarus, the land of Punishment. This place was guarded by the three Furies. They were horrible, withered old women, with snakes instead of hair, dog-like heads, wings like bats and bright, burning eyes. They carried torches and whips with metal studs.



Elysium (or the Elysian Fields)

These Furies could also visit earth to punish living mortals who had been cruel to children, to old people or to their parents.

Things to do

Section A

Write the heading *Land of the Dead*. Underline.

- 1 Here is a list of nine names mentioned in the previous pages. The letters in these names are all mixed up. Try to unscramble the letters to form a name, and write a sentence or two to explain the name you have uncovered.
(a) Ytxs; (b) Adshe; (c) Rufeis; (d) Sarutrat; (e) Remshe; (f) Phasledo; (g) Sylimue; (h) Noharc; (i) Rebrescu.
- 2 Draw and colour a picture of Cerberus, *or* of Charon.

Section B

Using your imagination and the description in the passage, draw and colour your own picture of the Furies.

(c) Crime and punishment

Men or women who had committed some unpardonable crime were sent to Tartarus to be punished. Tantalus was one such criminal. He was King of Lydia and, thanks to the blessings of



Tantalus offers stew to the gods

Zeus, was one of the richest of all men. He was even invited on occasions to attend the feasts of the gods. Yet soon he abused the trust of the gods. He stole ambrosia, the food of the gods, and gave it to ordinary people, hoping to make them immortal like the gods. To make matters worse, he then asked the gods to a banquet. He killed his own son, Pelops, and offered the gods a sort of cannibal-stew made from his son's body! All the gods realized what was in the stew and refused to eat it. Only Demeter, still grieving over the loss of her daughter Persephone, tasted the meat, chewing on a piece of shoulder. In anger, at this outrage, Zeus blasted Tantalus with a thunderbolt and restored Pelops to life. His damaged shoulder was replaced with one of ivory.

In the Underworld Tantalus was punished for his crime. He was tied to a pole in a pool of water which reached nearly to his chin. Whenever he felt thirsty, he bent his head to drink, but the water always sank out of reach and he could never get a drop to drink. Over his head, from numerous fruit trees, dangled pears, pomegranates, apples, figs—a tempting selection; but whenever he tried to pluck the fruit, the wind would blow it all away out of reach, leaving Tantalus hungry. Thus Tantalus, as punishment for his terrible crime, was condemned to suffer the ravages of everlasting hunger and thirst.

Tantalus suffers



Another famous criminal to be punished in the Underworld was Sisyphus, King of Corinth. He was one of the most cunning of men and even succeeded in cheating Hades. One day, a river god, Asopus, noticed that his daughter Aegina was missing. He suspected that Sisyphus had kidnapped her and so he came to Corinth to search for her. In fact, Sisyphus had not kidnapped the girl but he knew where she was. When Asopus asked him, Sisyphus refused to tell unless the river god produced a fresh-water spring to supply Corinth with running water. Asopus agreed to do so and Sisyphus then told him about his daughter: Zeus had fallen in love with her and had stolen her away. He even told Asopus where to find them. Zeus was angry with Sisyphus for betraying his secret and he immediately ordered his brother Hades to seize Sisyphus and give him a terrible punishment in the Underworld.

Hades went up to Corinth to claim Sisyphus for his kingdom of death. He carried a pair of handcuffs with which to arrest Sisyphus, but when he produced them Sisyphus asked what they were and how they worked. Hades foolishly showed him by placing them on his own wrists. Sisyphus rushed forward and locked them, thus making Hades his prisoner! This was a ridiculous situation since no one could die while Hades, god of the Dead, was a prisoner on earth—not even men who had been beheaded or cut to pieces. Ares, the god of War, was especially angry since now no one could die in battle! Ares therefore hurried to Corinth to free Hades. He also made sure

Sisyphus laughs at Hades





Sisyphus rolls the boulder up the hill

Dioneus falls into the burning pit



that this time Sisyphus went down to the Underworld with Hades to face his punishment.

Sisyphus, however, was as cunning as ever and first made his wife Merope promise to leave his body unburied. In the Underworld, he complained to Queen Persephone that he had not yet received the proper funeral rites and so should not have been allowed across the river Styx. He asked if he could be allowed to return to earth for a proper burial with a coin beneath his tongue. Persephone, not seeing through his cunning plan, granted his request on condition that he returned within three days. Sisyphus readily made the promise.

On his return to earth Sisyphus promptly forgot his promise to Persephone and refused to go back. He thought that he had cheated death. Eventually Hermes was sent to bring him down at last to the Land of the Dead. This time there was no mistake. Death had claimed him: his life was over.

In the Underworld Sisyphus was punished for giving away Zeus' secret and for trying to cheat death. He was condemned to roll a huge rock up the side of a hill and tumble it down the other side. The great hero Odysseus was once allowed to visit the Underworld, though he was still alive, and he later described Sisyphus' efforts:

I witnessed the torture of Sisyphus, as he tackled his huge rock with both his hands. Leaning against it with his arms and thrusting with his legs, he tried to push the boulder up-hill to the top. But every time, as he was going to send it toppling over the crest, its sheer weight turned it back, and the rock came bounding down again to level ground. So once more he had to wrestle with the thing and push it up, while the sweat poured from his limbs and the dust rose high above his head.

Sisyphus was never to succeed in his efforts.

Ixion, King of the Lapiths, was also punished in Tartarus. He had married Dia, the daughter of Dioneus, and had promised her father many gifts. When Dioneus asked for the gifts, Ixion invited him to dinner. He dug a pit beneath his guest's chair and covered it with branches. In the pit was a fire. When Dioneus sat on the chair his weight sent it crashing through the branches into the pit below where he was burned to death! Zeus actually liked Ixion and forgave him for this crime. He even invited Ixion to one of the gods' feasts. Ixion drank too much and assaulted a woman whom he thought to be the goddess Hera. In fact, it was a woman called Nephele whom Zeus had placed near Ixion on purpose in case something like this happened. Nephele later gave birth to a monstrous creature,

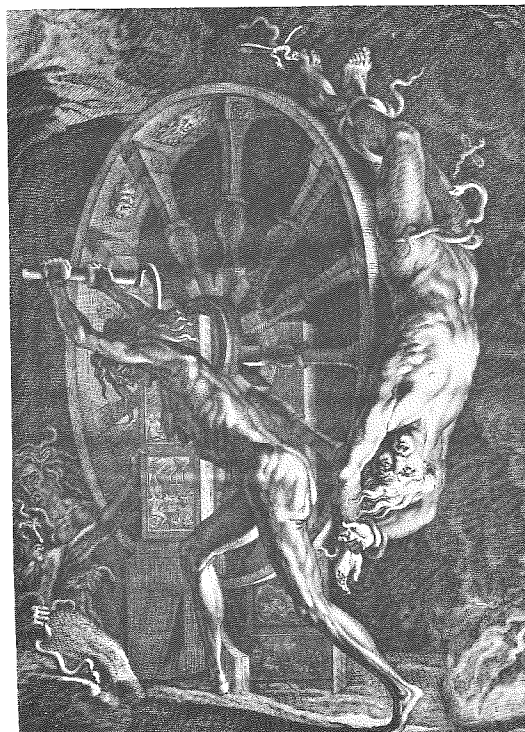


the Centaur, half-man and half-horse. For this second crime, Ixion was sentenced to death. In the Underworld, as a punishment, he was chained to a wheel. This wheel was then lit and sent spinning through the air forever.

Tityus was a giant who once scaled the heights of Olympus and attacked Leto, the mother of the twins Apollo and Artemis. He too was punished in Tartarus—he was chained to the ground while two giant vultures gnawed at his liver.

Perhaps the harshest punishment of all was given to the daughters of Danaus, King of Argos. He had fifty daughters, often called the Danaids. His brother Aegyptus (after whom the country of Egypt is called) had fifty sons. The two brothers quarrelled over their inheritance. Aegyptus suggested that the problem could be solved by uniting the two families in marriage: Danaus' fifty daughters would marry Aegyptus' fifty sons. Danaus suspected some treachery but he was forced to agree to the proposal. During the wedding-feast, Danaus, still suspicious and fearing for his daughters' safety, gave each of his daughters a long, sharp pin which they hid in their hair. That evening, they were to stab their new husbands through the heart.

Forty-nine of the girls obeyed their father and killed their husbands. One of the daughters spared her husband's life and helped him to escape. Although the girls had murdered their cousins, they were forgiven by Athena and Hermes, with Zeus' permission. They had only obeyed their father's orders, and in any case, Aegyptus had told his sons to murder the girls as soon as possible so that he might claim the whole inheritance



Left: Centaur; above: Ixion on the wheel; below: Tityus and the vultures





The Danaids

which he disputed with Danaus. Despite this, however, the three Judges of the Dead found the girls guilty of a crime and sentenced them to be punished. They were given the endless task of filling a broken pot with water carried in sieves.

Things to do

Use the heading *Crime and Punishment*. Underline.

- 1 Describe in your own words the punishment of *three* of the following:
Tantalus; Sisyphus; Ixion; Tityus; the Danaids.
Be sure to mention why they were punished.
- 2 Draw three pictures to illustrate your answer to question 1. Colour each drawing.
- 3 Is there any reason why the Greeks should tell stories about such terrible punishments?
- 4 What feature did all these punishments have in common?
- 5 Devise a punishment (for someone who deserves it) that will have the same feature as those in the stories.
- 6 Finally, to refresh your memory about all the names concerned with The Land of the Dead, copy the short word-puzzle opposite into your notebook and try to do it.

Clues

Across

- 4 A barrier of water
- 5 A place of punishment
- 7 Sheer heaven!
- 8 Murderous wives
- 9 A monstrous dog
- 11 Three wild women
- 12 He cheated death
- 13 A wicked king who was sent spinning
- 14 He was angry with 12 across and rescued a god from him

Down

- 1 The reluctant queen
- 2 The old boatman
- 3 God of the Dead
- 5 He was always hungry and thirsty
- 6 He could not get to the top
- 10 Those who were punished have been guilty of—
- 11 Three wild women again!
- 14 A river god who was angry

