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Dominik Mikołaj Stachowiak

THE CHRISTIAN FUNERAL RITE IN LATE ANTIQUITY — AN OVERVIEW

Abstract: The aim of this article was a reconstruction of every step of the Christian burial rite as it was in Late Antiquity. An attempt has been made to assess our ability to identify these stages, as well as the religion of the deceased, in material remains recorded during archaeological excavations. Burial customs in this period included washing and anointing the body, laying in state, night vigil, procession to the place of internment, and the burial itself. Afterward, the family entered the period of mourning, during which feasts and offerings were taking place on the grave. These steps are reconstructed mostly thanks to numerous references in the written sources, as well as some ethnological observations. Archaeological methods are limited to the study of the burial and its context, which allows only for observations regarding the contents of the grave. This, in turn, does not always allow for reconstruction of the set of actions that had taken place before the internment, nor the religious identification of the dead.

Keywords: Early Christianity, burial rite, funerary customs, religious identification

Christianity, as the dominant religion in Rome since the fourth century, undoubtedly brought huge changes in the Roman society, disseminating its view of human's role in the earthly world but also after death. This article concerns the funeral rite practiced by Christians in Late Antiquity and is an overview of the information we can obtain on this subject from various sources. It aims to reconstruct the sequence of actions that were performed in the aftermath of a Christian's death. The main source are archaeological data, although I also rely heavily on information from historical sources and, to some extent, ethnographic research. It should also be clarified that the liturgical issues connected to funerals have only been hinted at, without going into their exact course and theological meaning. I will focus primarily on archaeology's capabilities in the field of interpretation of material remains of subsequent elements of the ritual, i.e., its ability to reconstruct ritual activities and its religious identification based on material culture of the Late Antique period.

The period of Late Antiquity is defined differently by researchers of political history, religion, social history, or archaeologists.[1] For this work, I will assume the time frame between the third and the beginning of the seventh century. Its lower chronological limit is the period when Christian burials begin to be noticeable in the archaeological material, making it possible to observe the burial customs of this religious group. In turn, at the beginning of the seventh century, phenomena affecting the location of burial places gained strength, i.e., barbarian invasions on Byzantine

[1] See Cameron 2003.

territories, as well as the growing role of the cult of martyrs and the popularity of *ad sanctos* burials.[2] This resulted in a retreat from traditional burial sites along the roads leading to the cities and their transfer inside the walls.

The geographic scope of this work includes areas most rapidly Christianized and those from which come the most relevant sources, both archaeological and written. These are mainly the regions of the Eastern Mediterranean — Palestine, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and northern Africa.

Initially, Christian funerals were no different from the pagan or Jewish ones,[3] depending on the background from which the converts came. Therefore, the existence of a clearly defined Christian burial rite in the earliest period is debatable due to, among other reasons, the problem of the internal diversity of Christianity itself.[4] In the first centuries, the followers of Christ did not have a coherent and clearly defined set of views on all issues, and they differed even on the fundamental ones. Some Christians did not believe in the resurrection of the body on earth, but only in its resurrection in another world.[5] Others still had extreme views on the human soul, even allowing its continued existence on earth after death.[6] These views fluctuated, differed between particular groups of believers and between individuals, and often depended on the vision of the community's charismatic spiritual leader.[7] We may surmise that in the fourth century, after the mass Christianization of a large part of the empire's population, many pagan views, often unconsciously, found their place in Christian spirituality and practice.[8] The teaching of Christian intellectuals, on whose works our knowledge of the early Christian theology is based, was not entirely coherent and had no chance to penetrate the illiterate masses in all its complexity. Such doctrinal differences undoubtedly influenced also the beliefs related to death, which had a decisive impact on the funeral rite.[9]

Archaeologists studying the Christian burial rite can rely on a multitude of different types of sources, although all of them are useful only to a limited extent and with certain reservations. Undoubtedly, an important element of the source base are texts from the epoch in question, referring directly or indirectly to funeral customs. They not only allow for a precise reconstruction of the standard Christian funeral rituals, presented in texts of a normative or didactic nature, but they also give an insight into how the Church leaders reacted to any deviations from the prescribed funeral practices. First of all, however, only the written sources provide explicit information about beliefs, eschatology, and religious background, which is the intellectual foundation of activities performed during funeral ceremonies. Hagiographic or biographical texts also allow for the registration of specific funeral customs, used in specific cases and at a clearly defined time. The historical sources quoted below are by no means a complete catalog of texts relating to funeral practices, but rather a small sample intended to illustrate specific issues. References to further sources can be found in the cited studies.

The ethnographic analogies used in the work come mainly from the modern Greek culture, which results from the religious continuity from the early Christian times until today within the

[2] Chatzinikolaou, Terzopoulou 2012, p. 105; Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 388. On the practice itself, see, e.g., Wipszycka 1994, pp. 320–321; Brown 1981, pp. 34–35; from the point of view of potential abuses: Bond 2013, pp. 143–148.

[3] Saxer, Heid 2014, p. 672.

[4] On the earliest Christian movements, cf. Freeman 2009; King 2008; Mitchell, Young 2008, especially Part II: "The Jesus movements".

[5] Daley 1991, p. 222.

[6] On the belief in the necessity of the existence of the body as a condition for the survival of the soul in Syriac Christianity, see Daley 1991, pp. 73–74. This is important because it is a view held by a literate elite, able to express their views in theological terms, and not just an illiterate people.

[7] Meeks 2008, pp. 154–156; Wipszycka 1994, p. 7.

[8] Although some scholars question the fact of mass conversions to Christianity (e.g. Stark 1997), the influence of pagan culture on Christianity is indisputable: e.g., Eliade 1982, pp. 404–405; Grabka 1953, p. 1.

[9] A similar view is presented in Bollók 2018.

Greek Orthodox Church, the dominant religious organization in today's Greece. The limitations in implementing the Empire's Christianization policy in Greece allowed for some elements of the pre-Christian rite to be preserved to this day. This makes interesting ethnographic observations in the field of funeral rituals possible.[10]

Archaeology, however, remains the most important source of information on the Christian funeral rite. Excavations, despite their limitations, allow, to some extent for the reconstruction of burial and funeral activities performed in specific cases at the examined cemeteries. Thus, they make it possible to verify the declarative burial rite described in the written sources or to indicate other practices about which the texts are silent. However, field research allows only to register the contemporary state of the grave (tomb), burial, and grave goods. It should be borne in mind that postpositional processes, such as the decomposition of tissues and organic substances, reopening of the grave, etc., do not allow for the exact reconstruction of the state that existed at the time of closing the grave. Another element limiting the cognitive possibilities of archeology is the inadequate research methodology (especially incomplete documentation, lack of registration of stratigraphy, failure to collect appropriate samples, etc.) and, above all, the very frequent negligence to publish the results of excavations. Therefore, only a compilation of all available sources allows for the most accurate reconstruction of the Christian funeral rite in Late Antiquity.

In the Roman period, there were two alternative funeral rites in the territory of the Empire — cremation and inhumation. In the pagan circle both forms coexisted for centuries, although skeletal burial began to dominate at least from the middle of the second century AD;[11] at the same time inhumation was obligatory in the Jewish community. Due to several factors the choice of a burial rite among Christians has never been an issue. On the one hand, the first Christians were dominated by the Jewish tradition, according to which the deceased were to be buried. On the other hand, thanks to the proselytizing activity of the apostle Paul, the group of Christians was quickly joined by neophytes of the Greco-Roman culture, for whom cremation was familiar. It seems that the Christian faith in the resurrection of the body performed a decisive role in the victory of inhumation. Undoubtedly, the examples of Christ or Lazarus, who reportedly rose directly from their tombs, were important here. Although the Christian eschatology officially does not attach importance to the form of burial in the context of the resurrection,[12] probably for most of the faithful, the latter would be difficult to imagine in the case of burning the body.[13] Thus was born the Christian vision of death as a dream awaiting resurrection — κοίμησις (*koimesis*);[14] hence, the basic and only form of the Christian funeral rite is the skeletal burial.

[10] See Danforth, Tsiaras 1982; Marki 1989, pp. 101–104.
[11] Nock 1932, pp. 322–330; Toynbee 1971, pp. 39–40.
[12] Accusations against the resurrection of the body, made against Christians by their pagan adversaries (e.g., Celsus: Origen, *Contra Celsum*, pp. 274–275, or Porphyry: Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, pp. 90–92), included all circumstances in which the body cannot be buried — e.g., being eaten by wild beasts; theoretically, this would make resurrection of the body impossible. Christian intellectuals such as Athenagoras (*On the Resurrection of the Dead*, pp. 427–429), Justin (*Apologies*, pp. 125–129), Augustine of Hippo (*City of God*, pp. 38–39), and others (see Bollók 2018, pp. 250–251) have devoted much effort to proving that even in these cases the resurrection of the body is possible. Paradoxically, this approach makes the burial rite completely irrelevant, and so one could imagine Christian cremation as early as Late Antiquity. See Rebillard 2012, pp. 82–85.
[13] The discrepancies between the teachings of Christian intellectuals and the beliefs of the common people are observable on many levels, cf. Keller 1978; on the example of the cult of relics, they were analyzed by P. Brown: Brown 1981. The size of the victory of folk beliefs regarding cremation may be evidenced by its ban in the Greek Orthodox Church, which remains in force to this day.
[14] Daley 1991, e.g., pp. 73–75, 95, 114, 126, 135. The metaphor of death as sleep was used, e.g., by John Chrysostom (see John Chrysostom, *On the Cemetery and the Cross*; Kyriakakis 1974, pp. 41–42), although the comparison dates back to ancient times and Hesiod: Spyridakis 1950, p. 103, note 1; in the New Testament, see John 11:11–14, Mark 5:39, Matthew 9:24, Luke 8:52.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the funeral became a vital religious ceremony, constituting the final manifestation of faith in Christ. Above all, however, as in other cultures, funeral ceremonies were a rite of passage, associated with the departure of the deceased's soul from the world of the living and its inclusion in the world of the dead.[15] In this case, a Christian paradise.

From the time of Constantine, the organization of funerals in Constantinople was dealt with by organizations specially established to care for the dead, called *decani* (δεκανοί), *lecticarii* (λεκτικάριοι), and *copiatae* (κοπιαταί), and in the city of Rome *fossores*. Initially, 950 craft workshops in the new capital were allocated to the bishop's management and exempted from taxes, commissioned to maintain the funeral staff in return. In 537, Justinian issued two novellas (nos. 43 and 59) confirming the (previously established by Anastasius) exemption of 1,100 workshops from taxes for this purpose, and specifying details such as the amount of remuneration for individual categories of people participating in the funeral.[16] The existence of such *collegia*, whose members enjoyed the status of the lower clergy, is also attested in other cities, such as Ephesus, Antioch, and Alexandria.[17] They were also entrusted with some of the activities related to the funeral. These practices can be divided into several stages: 1. Preparation of the body of the deceased, 2. Laying-in-state — πρόθεσις (*prothesis*) and night vigil, 3. Procession, 4. Funeral, 5. Mourning practices.

Preparation of the body

The activities performed before the deceased was placed in the grave remain elusive for archaeology, but we can trace them thanks to the written sources and ethnographic observations.

Immediately after death, the deceased was carried to a low bier (*kline*/κλίνη)[18] and then his eyes and mouth were closed. Particular attention was paid to closing of the mouth through which, according to the ancient Greek belief, the dead's soul could escape, possessing the living.[19] If this was neglected, the very body could become home to a demon or a wandering soul.[20] A coin would probably have to be placed in the deceased's mouth at this stage if the family wished to perpetuate the old Greek custom of "Charon's obol", as the next step was to attach the deceased's lower jaw to the skull. This, in addition to the obvious aesthetic considerations, was to keep the body "closed" to the evil spirits[21] (At the same time, a belief in some kind of existence of the soul of the deceased in the body persisted[22]). One by one, the deceased's limbs had to be stretched out while his hands were sometimes folded over his stomach or crossed over his chest, giving him the appearance of a sleeping person. These activities were performed by the family and relatives of the dead before rigor mortis set in, when the body was still warm.[23]

According to the pre-Christian tradition known to the Greeks, Romans and Jews alike, the entire body of the deceased had to be washed.[24] Warm, clean water,[25] but also, wine, milk,[26] or perfumed water was used.[27] This ritual served to cleanse the body both on a physical

[15] See van Gennep 1960, pp. 145–165.
[16] *Novels of Justinian*, pp. 387–391, 451–460.
[17] Bond 2013, pp. 135–137.
[18] This practice is certified, among others, by in the descriptions of the death of Bishop Peter of Alexandria (d. 311), St. Macrina (d. 379), St. Basil the Great (d. 379) and others: Kyriakakis 1974, p. 38; Spyridakis 1950, p. 102. In Egypt, biers constructed of interconnected bundles of palm leaf stems covered with material tied at the corners to the structure were used, see Huber 2009.
[19] Kyriakakis 1974, p. 38; Spyridakis 1950, p. 79; e.g., Justin the Martyr writes about the possibility of being possessed by the soul of the deceased, see Dodds 1965, p. 54, note 3.
[20] Spyridakis 1950, p. 103.
[21] Spyridakis 1950, p. 104; Kyriakakis 1974, pp. 40, 57.
[22] Spyridakis 1950, p. 122; see note 41.
[23] Spyridakis 1950, p. 104; Kyriakakis 1974, pp. 38–42.
[24] Spyridakis 1950, p. 107. In the late Byzantine period, only selected parts of the body were washed.
[25] *Ibidem*, pp. 106–107.
[26] *Acts of Peter*, p. 426.
[27] Kyriakakis 1974, p. 44.

level — from sweat, blood, or other secretions that could contaminate the skin, and on a spiritual level — from the presence of evil spirits that caused illness and death; this was aimed at protecting the living.[28] Moreover, the procedure would have woken up a person mistakenly declared dead.[29]

Immediately after washing, the body was anointed, which had sacred and apotropaic functions but also more mundane ones. Fragrant oils were supposed to mask the unpleasant smell of decay and preserve the body in the best possible condition. At this stage, the differences in the means used between the poor and the rich became stark. The latter spared no expense to provide their dead with special treatment, anointing their bodies with, for example, a mixture of resin, myrrh, aloe, and spices.[30] This practice was probably taken over by the Christians from the Judaic tradition,[31] and was present in the Christian funeral rite from the very beginning; it is considered normal at the turn of the second and third centuries by Clement of Alexandria.[32] At the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, Pseudo-Dionysius thus justified the pouring of holy oil on the dead body by the bishop: "The sacred anointing with oil once called the initiate to sacred combat; now the pouring on of the oil reveals that in this sacred combat the deceased fought his way to victory".[33]

Burying the deceased naked, especially in the context of the later πρόθεσις, was considered unacceptable;[34] therefore, immediately after anointing, the corpse had to be wrapped in a white linen shroud prepared by the closest family, or temporarily covered with a linen sheet, and then dressed in an appropriate outfit. Afterward, the legs were tied together and the hands were tied to the chest with bands of cloth or ropes. This custom was probably adopted directly from the Jewish tradition.[35] Archaeological excavations confirm the binding of the limbs of the dead — hands were probably tied to the body or tightly wrapped in a shroud, usually placed along the body. In some skeletons, the position of the hands implies that they were tied with a rope. The legs were tied at the ankles or knees, and in rare cases at both points.[36] The use of shrouds is also confirmed by archaeological discoveries, e.g., in the catacombs of Rome and the Church of St. Sebastian Outside the Walls[37] and the iconography [Fig. 1], but mainly by the extremely well-preserved finds from

Fig. 1. A slab with an engraved image of a gravedigger and a body wrapped in a shroud ready for burial. The Catacombs of Commodilla (after Gounaris 2000, p. 39, fig. 17)

[28] Spyridakis 1950, pp. 108–109. Belief in the ritual impurity of the dead, burial and the grave is condemned by the Apostolic Constitutions from around 380 (*Constitutiones apostolorum*, pp. 167, 171–172). See Hertz 2004, pp. 33–34; Davis 1999.

[29] Kyriakakis 1974, p. 44.

[30] *Acts of Peter*, p. 426.

[31] See Green 2008, pp. 160–163. The anointing of the body is also mentioned many times in the New Testament: Matthew 26:12, John 19:39–40, Luke 23:56.

[32] Clement, *Christ the Educator*, p. 150.

[33] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, p. 256.

[34] Kyriakakis 1974, p. 48.

[35] Spyridakis 1950, p. 111; Kyriakakis 1974, pp. 48–49; cf. the case of Lazarus: John 11:44.

[36] Makropoulou 2007, pp. 451–452.

[37] De Santis 2014, p. 76.

Egypt.[38] They enable the reconstruction of the wrapping process of the deceased in a shroud in the Late Antique period in this region [Fig. 2]. The body, dressed in a simple tunic, was laid on the back, usually with the arms along the body. Then it was wrapped, except for the head, in several layers of cloth, each of which was tightly tied with a string; palm leaf stalks were used to stiffen the body and limbs, and fillers from their chopped bast were used to level the surface. The space between the head and the body was additionally filled with rolled strips of fabric. Then the body was wrapped in the last layer of fabric attached with colored ribbons forming an irregular pattern. In the end, a similar layered structure was created around the head of the dead, after which the entire body was covered with a mat made of palm fibers.[39] The separate treatment of the head probably stems from the fact that it remained uncovered as long as possible to honor the deceased.[40]

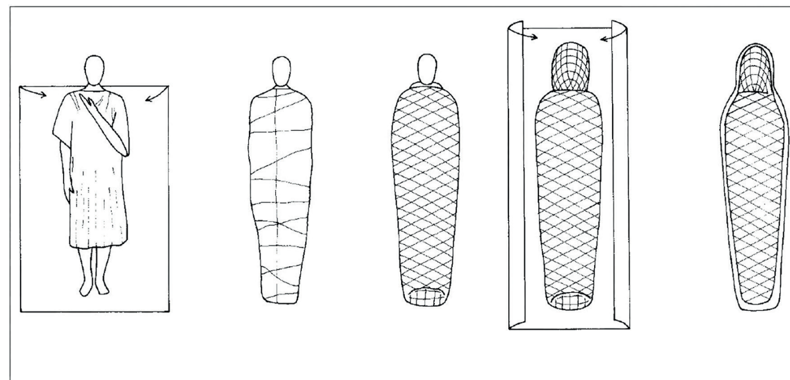

Fig. 2. Scheme of wrapping the deceased in a shroud in the cemetery of el-Kom el-Ahmar in Egypt (after Huber 2007, p. 56, fig. 47)

The body was usually dressed in white linen robes,[41] though well-to-do families all too often, according to the Fathers of the Church, opted for gold-stitched silks, purple-dyed fabrics, and other extremely expensive materials.[42] At the same time bishops, clergy, and monks were buried in the best liturgical vestments and habits, respectively.[43] The deceased's outfit was usually complemented by a headdress such as a scarf, and sandals,[44] of which only small nails, constituting sole fittings, are usually preserved in the archaeological record.[45] Excavations in late Roman and early Byzantine cemeteries have contributed significantly to our knowledge of the clothes the deceased were dressed in, substantially supplementing and, in a way, illustrating the information acquired from the written sources. Accessories such as iron, bronze, or gilded belt buckles as well as fibulae and, less frequently, buttons, testify to the current fashion and the material status

[38] E.g., Huber 2007; Godlewski 2005. Findings based on them should be treated with some caution when transferring them to other regions of the Mediterranean world due to the cultural distinctiveness of Egypt, established for millennia, and to some extent also maintained in Late Antiquity.

[39] Huber 2007, pp. 41–48.

[40] Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 379.

[41] Dressing the deceased in white was to maintain his ritual purity achieved by washing and anointing. White robes for the dead were preferred both in ancient Greece and Rome, as well as among the Jews: Spyridakis 1950, p. 113; Kyriakakis 1974, p. 52.

[42] Gold threads were discovered, for example, in several graves in Thessaloniki: Makropoulou 2007, p. 445; Antonaras 2001. Gold-interwoven fabrics were also discovered in graves in the Basilica of St. Sebastian outside the Walls in Rome: De Santis 2014, p. 76. Criticism of rich costumes in the writings of the Fathers of the Church: Augustine, *Expositions*, pp. 43, 375, as well as John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa (Kyriakakis 1974, pp. 49–51).

[43] Spyridakis 1950, p. 112.

[44] Kyriakakis 1974, p. 52; Spyridakis 1950, p. 113.

[45] Makropoulou 2006, p. 3; Makropoulou 2007, p. 448; De Santis 2014, p. 77.

of the deceased. Women's and, sometimes, men's and even children's outfits were complemented by jewelry like rings, earrings, or bracelets made of various materials, such as iron, lead, copper, silver or gold, semi-precious stones and pearls. Jewelry, except for devotional items, gradually ceased to accompany the deceased after death, disappearing completely in the sixth century. It should be noted, however, that most burials, at least in Thessalonica, were devoid of it.[46]

The last element of preparing the body for burial was putting a wreath of flowers on the dead's head. This custom concerned especially unmarried people,[47] it came from the Greco-Roman tradition and smoothly entered into the practice of early Christian funerals. Due to its pagan and bacchic connotations, however, it was not well received by early Christian authors.[48] Although in the late second century, Marcus Minuncius Felix[49] stated that the Christians do not put wreaths on the dead, later evidence from the early Christian and Byzantine periods and modern Greece show that the custom was never eradicated; moreover, the wreath became a frequent motif in Christian iconography, signifying the triumph over death. Undoubtedly, the mass influx of converts from the pagan community transferred many pagan practices into the Christian tradition. The practice of adorning corpses with cut hair, witnessed by Clement of Alexandria, was probably also a pre-Christian custom.[50]

Despite numerous historical sources or ethnographic analogies describing the above-characterized stages of the funeral rite, only some of its elements are captured by archaeological research. The process of preparing the deceased for the funeral is no exception here. Sometimes, based on the observation of the skeleton arrangement, it is possible to register the practice of tying the limbs or attaching the jaw to the skull. In some cases, especially in arid climates, the surviving shrouds allow for a thorough reconstruction of the process of wrapping the body, as well as an analysis of the fabrics used. Owing to this, it was possible to hypothesize, for example, that low-quality materials used in the funeral rite were mass-produced, especially for the shrouds.[51] This allows not only to verify but also to significantly supplement the information obtained from the written sources. Other tangible elements of the first stage of the funeral rite are, above all, the objects accompanying the deceased, which were then deposited with the body. This mainly concerns the aforementioned metal objects, jewelry, buckles, or fittings, as well as fragments of fabrics preserved in suitable conditions. Unfortunately, such perishable organic materials as flowers are unable to survive in archaeological contexts, which is why the tradition of putting on wreaths cannot be confirmed by archaeology.

***Prothesis* or laying-in-state**

After the proper preparation, as in the case of the pagan Greeks and Romans, the body was carried out and placed in an open coffin, on a bed (κλίνη), or other elevation placed in front of the entrance to the house, or in the largest room. The deceased was laid facing east. Around him, lamps or candles and incense were lit. A popular belief was that the smoke of burning resin and

[46] Makropoulou 1997, pp. 56–69; Makropoulou 2003, pp. 61–62; Makropoulou 2006, pp. 3–4.
[47] In this form, the custom survived in the modern Greek tradition: Koukoules 1940, p. 13.
[48] Clement, *Christ the Educator*, pp. 153–158; Kyriakakis 1974, p. 54. Tertullian argued that the tradition of wreaths originated from pagan idols and never appeared in Judaic or Christian tradition. In addition, he claimed: "It is as much against nature to long after a flower with the head, as it is to crave food with the ear, or sound with the nostril": Tertullian, *De Corona*, pp. 145–149.
[49] Bercot 1998, p. 186.
[50] Koukoules 1940, p. 13.
[51] Huber 2007, p. 52.

exotic herbs had strong cleansing properties and chased away not only bad smells but also the demons associated with them. It also had heavenly connotations and was thought to bring the earth and sky closer together. This way, it was the perfect protection for both the living and the dead.[52]

During the laying-in-state, a kind of wake was organized inside the house. Family and friends were invited to pay their respects to the deceased and express condolences to the family.[53] As the corpse was displayed, the mourners shouted loudly and wept. Although it was certainly an expression of real emotion, it was intended not only to honor the deceased, but above all to announce the news of his death in the area.[54] At the same time, the assembled called the deceased by his name following the custom dating back to the Homeric times.[55] Like pagans, Christians of both sexes tore their robes apart, women scratched their faces and breasts until they bled and plucked their hair, whereas the men were rubbing mud into their hair. Another tradition originating from the pagan culture was to cut one's hair and offer it to the deceased as a farewell gift. These customs, being excessive and deriving from the pre-Christian tradition, were criticized by Basil the Great and John Chrysostom,[56] although the fact that they survived in Greece at least until the twentieth century proves that the Church Fathers' admonitions were ineffective.[57] The public display of the deceased clergy took place in the church and of the monks in the monastery.

Night vigil

The funeral was usually carried out the day after the death of a given person, although there were no binding regulations in this regard.[58] In such cases, a significant element of funeral ceremonies was the night vigil by the corpse, during which psalms and dirges were sung.[59] One way to honor the deceased was to compose songs based on his life, called *moirologia* (μοιρολόγια). Ethnographic analogies from some regions of modern Greece indicate that these songs could have been sung sitting or kneeling on the ground. Descriptions in late antique sources indicate their existence as early as this period.[60]

Probably one of the reasons for the night vigil with the deceased was the fear of falling asleep in his presence. A wandering soul could, according to folk beliefs, harm the sleepers.[61] In this case, singing seems to be the perfect way to chase away drowsiness.

[52] Caseau 2007, pp. 85–87.
[53] Spyridakis 1950, pp. 115–116, 118; Kyriakakis 1974, pp. 54–55.
[54] Spyridakis 1950, p. 118.
[55] Toynbee 1971, p. 44; According to G. Spyridakis (Spyridakis 1950, pp. 119–120), this custom is aimed at summoning the soul of the deceased back to the body. In contemporary Greece, see Danforth, Tsiaras 1982, p. 128.
[56] All mentions of death and funeral ceremonies by John Chrysostom were collected by D. Loukatos: Loukatos 1940.
[57] Spyridakis 1950, pp. 120–123; Koukoules 1940, pp. 17–20. In the 15th speech, Gregory of Nazianzus lists the activities that a mother normally undertakes after the loss of a child: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, pp. 80–81.
[58] Koukoules 1940, p. 27. In some cases, especially when the arrival of the family from afar was expected, or the *prothesis* of the deceased public figure or a saint drew crowds, the body could remain unburied for several days (Saxer, Heid 2014, p. 672; Spyridakis 1950, p. 132).
[59] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, p. 401. The custom of vigil with the dead is also confirmed by, for example, canon 28 of the Third Council of Carthage in 397: *Acta synodalia ab anno 381*, p. 79.
[60] Koukoules 1940, p. 22; see also Loukatos 1940, pp. 59–62.
[61] Spyridakis 1950, pp. 128–129.

Funeral procession

The next day, the beginning of the funeral was announced by the arrival of a bishop or a presbyter, accompanied by deacons, at the deceased's home.[62] Although in the first two centuries AD, the Church hierarchy was not yet fully crystallized, its later development resulted in a gradual monopolization of religious activities, funeral ceremonies included.[63] Thus, the participants of the vigil, the clergy, and all those who wanted to accompany the dead on his last journey, were getting ready to march by lighting candles and incense, while the bier with the body carried on the shoulders of the *lecticarii*, relatives, or friends of the deceased, who in a solemn procession headed towards the burial ground.[64] In some cases, the distance that had to be walked was quite considerable. Justinian's Novella 59 provides for circumstances where the funeral of a resident of Constantinople takes place outside the Theodosian walls, thus as much as 5–6 km from the city center. In such instances, due to the large distance, the legislator ensured an increased remuneration for the funeral entourage.[65] The funeral procession with the body of St. Macrina lasted the entire day.[66] A notable example was the cortege with the body of St. Simeon the Stylite, which, accompanied by clergy, lay people, soldiers, and high-ranking state officials travelled with great pomp the almost 80-kilometer distance between the place of his death and the cathedral in Antioch, where he was finally buried. Due to the great distance, the coffin with the body was placed on a wagon.[67] A permanent element of this kind of procession was the burning of candles and incense, as well as the singing of psalms.

Probably since the fifth century, the funeral procession first headed to the church,[68] and only after set off on its way to the cemetery, in all likelihood located nearby. Writing around the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite describes some of the actions undertaken on the occasion of the death of a "holy man". If he came from the clergy, the corpse was displayed on the steps of the altar, and if he was a monk or a layman, the body was placed in an oratory, near the entrance for the clergy. Then, prayers began under the leadership of the bishop, and deacons read passages from the Bible about the resurrection and sang psalms. At some point, most likely during the celebration of the Eucharist, the catechumens were dismissed, and the names of the saints, whose group the deceased had joined, were read aloud. Then, the bishop prayed for the deceased, asking for forgiveness of his sins, and kissed him, followed by the rest of those present.[69] The latter custom was initially practiced just before death and only with the passage of time transformed into the kiss of the dead.[70] Next, the hierarch poured the holy oil on the body and preached a prayer for all gathered.[71] The funeral rite described by Pseudo-Dionysius required the placing of the body in the temple, and therefore also an extensive network of cemetery churches. Most likely, it describes a situation contemporary to the writer in the sixth century; however, it can be assumed that similar circumstances were valid also in the previous century.

[62] Contrary to pagan customs, Christians conducted funeral ceremonies in daylight. This practice was banned during the reign of Julian the Apostate: Spyridakis 1950, pp. 132–133.

[63] Spyridakis 1950, p. 139. According to *Ordo Romanus* XLIX, a document describing the funeral ritual in Rome in the 7th–8th centuries, a clergyman was summoned while the dying person was still alive to give him communion and accompany him at the later stages of the funeral: Janicki 2016, p. 68. This practice certainly began earlier.

[64] Koukoules 1940, pp. 27–28.

[65] *Novels of Justinian*, p. 457.

[66] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, p. 50.

[67] *Life of St. Simeon Stylites*, p. 196.

[68] Kallinikos 1921, pp. 705–707.

[69] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, pp. 250–251.

[70] Spyridakis 1950, pp. 147–149; cf. Toynbee 1971, p. 43.

[71] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, p. 251.

As already mentioned, in Constantinople and, probably, in the largest cities of the Empire, the organization of funerals was highly professionalized. Bier, on which the deceased was carried, was lent to the family free of charge. Similarly, with no fee, the cortege was attended by *lecticarii* and women singing and carrying candles during the ceremony.[72] These women were professionals, organized hierarchically in a quasi-monastic fashion, devoting themselves to celibacy, piety, and service, and living under the supervision of the superiors of the city's hospitals.[73] The state provided a group of at least eight such sisters or canonesses and three acolytes for one deceased, but if the family wished to hire more, they had to do that at their own expense.[74] The same logic was followed when borrowing biers, two of which, probably gilded, kept in the treasuries of the Studios and St. Stefan, were intended for funerals of aristocracy and wealthy people who had to pay for a larger funeral procession and entourage from their own funds.[75] Some Christians, in accordance with the ancient tradition, employed also professional mourners, despite the condemnation of this custom by John Chrysostom.[76]

Activities leading up to the funeral — *prothesis*, vigil, and procession, although crucial for our understanding of the entire ritual, are completely unrecognizable in the archaeological material. This, naturally, is due to the nature of these ceremonies, which leave no material traces in a form that can be identified and recorded at an archaeological site.

Funeral

Having reached the resting place outside the city, the bier with the body was placed near a previously prepared grave.[77] Then, the priest prayed for the remission of sins and acceptance of the deceased into the "land of the pious"[78] and, perhaps, gave the Eucharist to the gathered. This practice is mentioned by St. Augustine in the context of his mother's funeral in Ostia.[79] This is also indirectly evidenced by the bans on giving communion to the dead, repeated at the synods in Carthage in 397 and 419,[80] although, since this ban also included baptism, such service would rather take place in the home of the deceased.[81]

In the early Christian period, several grave types were used[82] — from mausoleums, sarcophagi, hypogea, cist graves, and crypts, to simple pit graves with reinforced walls and covered with tiles. Regardless of the grave's form, the funeral's next stage must have looked similar. After a prayer by the priest, the dead was placed in the burial chamber. In the case of more important deceased this was preceded by a funeral oration (eulogy). In the Byzantine period, a hymn (τροπάριον) based on Psalms 117 and 131 was sung when the body was placed in the grave.[83] In most cases, the deceased would be placed directly on the ground, bricks, stone slabs, or other materials lining the bottom of the grave or the tomb's floor.[84] Sometimes, the body was lowered

[72] This results from a fragment of the novella, in which the legislator forbids the sisters from demanding payment for the delivery of candles: *Novels of Justinian*, p. 456.
[73] *Ibidem*, pp. 454, 456, notes 11 and 15.
[74] *Ibidem*, p. 456.
[75] *Ibidem*, pp. 457–458; Koukoules 1940, pp. 30–31.
[76] Rebillard 2012, p. 133.
[77] Usually, the construction of a tomb with a more demanding architectural form was commissioned during one's lifetime. Simpler forms of graves could be dug as needed.
[78] *Constitutiones apostolorum*, pp. 266, 317–318.
[79] De Santis 2014, p. 77.
[80] *Acta synodalia ab anno 381*, pp. 74, 93, 265.
[81] On the Eucharist given to the dying, cf. Grabka 1953; Rebillard 2012.
[82] See, e.g., Borg 2013; Marki 2006, pp. 100–110; Makropoulou 2007, pp. 395–424; Laskaris 2000, pp. 291–310; Trakosopoulou-Salakidou Panti, Basileiou 2018, pp. 521–530.
[83] Velkovska 2001, p. 35. The oldest complete Byzantine burial ritual is known from the 10th–11th centuries; only single prayers are known from the earlier period: Velkovska 2001, p. 30.
[84] Konstantoulas 2012, pp. 296–297.

or brought in on biers, boards, or in a wooden coffin, later left in the grave, as evidenced by the finds of nails and traces of wood.[85] The dead was placed on the back, with the head facing west, so that the eyes of the deceased were directed towards the east. This was reinforced by a stone or brick "pillow", which was placed under the head.[86]

To allow for this positioning of the body, the grave pit or burial chamber had to be properly oriented first. Most likely, the grave was dug at dawn, so that one of its shorter sides pointed in the direction from which the sun rose that day. This is why, due to the perceived changing location of the sun emerging from behind the horizon during the year, graves located in the same cemetery may deviate from the geographical east and from one another. Additional circumstances influencing the orientation of the grave include the availability of the room, although this factor was probably more important in the construction of grave clusters occupying a larger space.[87] According to archaeological research in various Christian cemeteries throughout the Roman world, the orientation of the grave towards the east was preferred by Christians. This custom, however, had a weak theological foundation and stemmed from folk beliefs rather than commands of the Scriptures. Eden's location in the east was cited as justification for this custom;[88] in Christian beliefs, the second coming of Christ is also to take place in the east and, according to John Chrysostom, the soul is to go there after death.[89] Laying the body with the head to the west was a reversal of the pagan custom, where the deceased was laid with his head to the east so that his gaze was directed towards the sunset, symbolizing death.[90]

As I have already mentioned, belief in some kind of posthumous existence of the soul in a dead body was very much rooted in the ancient world and was in a way inherited by Christians. Thus, placing the body in a tomb was not usually the last activity that took place there before its closing. A pagan custom, also practiced by some Christians,[91] was to place a coin with the deceased, which, according to ancient Greek authors, was to be a Charon's fee for transporting the soul to the other bank of the Styx to the land of the dead.[92] Coins were usually found in the mouth, hand, or on the body of the deceased,[93] which allows us to make some practical assumptions. The coin was usually placed in the mouth of the dead, but this had to be done before the mandible was attached to the skull,[94] otherwise, it would have to be untied, risking the body being possessed by evil spirits. A popular way around this was to simply put a coin in the dead man's palm. On the other hand, if the deceased was wrapped in a shroud, the "Charon's obol" was placed or simply thrown over the body. It was not uncommon in the early Byzantine period for more than one coin to be deposited in graves — there are many cases of coin hoards from funerary contexts from the fourth-sixth centuries.[95] The motivation behind this custom among the Christians remains unclear. Perhaps it was simply a force of habit and a way of upholding the several-hundred-year

[85] Makropoulou 2007, p. 449.

[86] Although it was an element of pre-Christian origin, it fit perfectly with the idea of death as a dream, and was widely adopted by Christians: Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 379; Konstantoulas 2012, pp. 302–303.

[87] Makropoulou 2007, p. 437; Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 379.

[88] Gen. 2:8

[89] Spyridakis 1950, p. 117.

[90] Konstantoulas 2012, p. 301.

[91] This is evidenced by the continuation of this custom from ancient times, through the early Christian period and the Middle Ages to modern Greece: Koukoules 1940, pp. 11–12; Grabka 1953, p. 26, note 150; Danforth, Tsiaras 1982, pp. 40–41.

[92] Grabka 1953, pp. 8–21; cf. Alföldy-Găzdac, Găzdac 2013; Stevens 1991; Konstantoulas 2012, pp. 307–308; Lucian, *On Funerals*, p. 119.

[93] Makropoulou 2007, pp. 454–455.

[94] According to Lucian of Samosata, the obol was placed in the mouth immediately after death: Lucian, *On Funerals*, p. 119.

[95] Konstantoulas 2012, p. 307; Makropoulou 2007, p. 455; Makropoulou 2001, pp. 268–270.

old tradition, or perhaps a kind of security measure.[96] It seems, however, that the reason why this and other funeral customs were practiced was primarily a desire to show respect to the dead; a specific set of rituals and activities constituted a culturally grounded and commonly known pattern of conduct in such a situation.

Besides the coins, Christians were leaving other objects in the graves of their dead. Calling them funerary offerings or grave goods seems not entirely appropriate due to the intention with which they were placed there. These were primarily glass or ceramic perfume bottles — *unguentaria*, or jugs; less often also dishes for solid foods. It is believed that in the Christian practice, these vessels were empty after the grave was closed or filled in, as their contents had been used in previous rituals; therefore, they were not offerings in the strict sense.[97] These objects, especially tableware, were probably related to the feasts that were taking place in connection with the funeral. In turn, *unguentaria* once contained perfumes or oils, which were likely used to anoint the body. Although this ritual was usually taking place in the privacy of a home, one can imagine a situation in which the priest pours over the body of the deceased the contents of a flacon with consecrated oil or a similar substance, in the manner described by Pseudo-Dionysius.[98] The *Acts of Peter* also mention pouring a liquid, in this case, honey, directly into the sarcophagus, i.e., at the funeral stage.[99] Jugs or bottles with wine or oil, which were emptied into the grave in the act of libation, were treated similarly. Vessels were usually placed by the head or legs of the dead, although they were sometimes left tipped in such a position as to ensure that all the liquid was absorbed into the ground.[100]

Although this is evidently a pagan survival, the existence of this tradition in modern Greece does not allow for the classification of burials accompanied by vessels as pagan, as this would be methodologically incorrect. Such an approach would lead to the classification of even modern Orthodox Christian burials as pagan. As is the case today, utensils used in funeral ceremonies were considered ritually impure and were left in the grave.[101] Therefore, they were not funeral offerings but objects burdened with a cultural taboo related to contact with death. This way, fragments of ceramics or glass vessels deliberately broken on the surface were also ritually deposited in the graves.[102] An aspect that indicates the ritual significance of containers placed in graves is the fact that at least some of them are produced especially for funeral needs in workshops located at cemeteries.[103] It should be noted, however, that at least in Late Antique Thessalonica, none of the types of glass vessels were specifically made for funerary rites,[104] unlike pottery, some types of which were found only in funerary contexts, and which showed no signs of previous use.[105]

[96] The desire to diversify religion and accumulate rituals is evidenced by the case of Fabia Aconia Paulina, the wife of a fourth-century proconsul, who was initiated into the mysteries of Isis as well as the Eleusinian, Lernaean and Aeginean mysteries. She was also a hierophant of Hecate: Dodds 1965, p. 133, note 2.

[97] Antonaras 2010, p. 392; Antonaras 2018, pp. 219–220.

[98] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, p. 256; Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 380; this hypothesis is supported by Antonaras 2018, pp. 219–220, in whose opinion this custom was connected with the fact of ruining the deceased's expensive clothing, which was supposed to discourage thieves — in my opinion, it could only be a side effect; cf. Makropoulou 2007, p. 459. The ritual of pouring wine or oil over the deceased by a priest making the sign of the cross with the vessel takes place also in modern Greece: Danforth, Tsiaras 1982, p. 42.

[99] *Acts of Peter*, p. 426.

[100] Makropoulou 2007, p. 459.

[101] This custom lasted until the seventh century, after which it was abandoned, probably under the influence of the Church. However, it was revived in the late Byzantine period (13th–15th centuries, Antonaras 2010, pp. 407, 421–422) and is cultivated to this day: Makropoulou 2007, p. 459; see also Danforth, Tsiaras 1982. Oil and wine libations are also performed, for example, in modern day Serbia: Anderson-Stojanović 1987, p. 121.

[102] Makropoulou 2007, pp. 460, 462; the same was done in modern Greece: Politis 1894.

[103] Ceramic dishes purchased on site: Makropoulou 2007, p. 459; pottery and glass workshops in the area of cemeteries, functioning simultaneously with them: Marki 2006, pp. 65–67; Antonaras 2016, pp. 20–24, 124, 142, 144, 171; Winemaking: Antonaras 2016, p. 194.

[104] Antonaras 2018, p. 219.

[105] Makropoulou 2001, p. 266; Paisidou 2005, p. 524.

In archaeological practice, objects placed in a grave can be interpreted as funerary offerings, if none of the finds indicate the Christian faith of the deceased. However, even in the latter case, the objects discovered in the graves could be interpreted as such, especially if the vessels are accompanied by everyday objects, such as spindle whorls or tools.[106] Even *unguentaria*, which were after all perfume containers, can be considered in this way. These were commonly used in everyday life, for example in baths, meetings, or feasts.[107]

Sometimes oil lamps are found in graves, which had both a utilitarian and symbolic significance and were used in crypts or catacombs where sunlight did not reach, or in conditions of limited visibility in surface cemeteries. Also here, in some cases, care was taken to ensure that all the oil leaked out of the lamp after it was extinguished, turning it upside down.[108]

Another custom, confirmed by both written and archaeological sources, is the incensing of graves, which was intended to cleanse the contamination of resting place of the dead but also significantly contributed to the creation of an esoteric, sacred atmosphere of the rites, engaging not only the sense of sight but also the sense of smell. The belief in the power of incense and its widespread use in sacral contexts had its sources in the pagan culture, which made the first Christians critical of it. However, this did not prevent the adaptation of this custom in various Christian cult contexts, including funeral rites. This is evidenced not only by the finds of clay censers [Fig. 3], but also their scattered contents.[109]

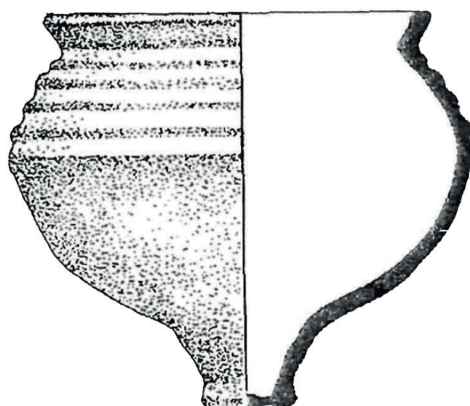

Fig. 3. Ceramic censer from a fourth-century tomb.
Western Cemetery in Thessaloniki
(after Makropoulou 2007, p. 621, fig. 7)

Many tombs functioned for a long time, serving as a resting place not only for one deceased but also for his family. This entailed some practical issues, such as what to do with the remains already lying in the grave or how to add another body without exposing the skeleton of the previous occupant. The latter dilemma is described by Gregory of Nyssa. During the funeral of his sister St. Macrina in their family tomb, he decided to open the tombstone slightly, and then slide a sheet of

[106] De Santis 2014, p. 78.
[107] The practice of widespread use of perfumes was criticized by Clement of Alexandria: Clement, *Christ the Educator*, pp. 146–150.
[108] Makropoulou 2007, pp. 459–460; Fiocchi Nicolai, Bisconti, Mazzoleni 2009, p. 82.
[109] Caseau 2007, pp. 85–87; Early Christian writers' opinions: Bercot 1998, pp. 361–362. Incense ash finds: Makropoulou 2007, p. 456.

linen on both sides, so as not to expose their mother's remains to the sight of bystanders.[110] In this case, the place for further burials must have been still available, thus there was no need for more interference. Examples of burying several dead in one grave are numerous, as are burials placed in such a manner as to leave space for another.[111] However, more radical measures had to be resorted to when there was no more available space. In the Thessalonica cemetery, among others, it was common practice to move the bones of the dead to the side of the burial chamber in order to make room for new burials. Special respect was given to the skulls, which were invariably placed on top of the pile of bones. Along with human remains, objects accompanying the original burial, such as ceramic or glass vessels, jewelry, and even coins or pottery shards, were also moved to the edge of the grave.[112] In my opinion, this indicates that, in these cases, tools, such as shovels, were used to move the remains, rather than picking the bones up by hand. Otherwise, small items would have probably been overlooked. However, there are also graves in which only the skulls were moved, as a symbolic equivalent of the entire skeleton.[113] In some cases, bones from older burials were deposited in separate ossuaries.[114] One can surmise that they were bones from unmarked older graves, which were accidentally dug into.

Another way to economically use the available space of the tombs was to add more dead in layers, sometimes separating older burials with a coat of lime, which was also used for hygienic purposes.[115]

The cognitive possibilities of archeology are fully revealed only at the funeral stage because the subject of its study is usually the burial and its immediate surroundings. In the case of an undisturbed archaeological context, it is possible to determine the position in which the deceased was buried, as well as to identify some of the ritual practices that took place before the tomb was closed or a pit was filled in. One of them is incensing the corpse and the inside of the grave. Unfortunately, the act itself leaves no traces, thus, in most cases, its performance cannot be ascertained. In some instances, however, the contents of the censer was intentionally emptied into the grave, usually before the body was placed in it, as evidenced by numerous finds of charcoal under the skeleton.[116]

The information that can be obtained in almost every case includes the number of people buried, the arrangement of the skeletons, and the treatment of older burials. The Christian dead were invariably buried on their backs, with their heads facing west, hands folded on the pelvis, or placed along the corpus. A characteristic feature of Christian burials is also considered to be a minimal amount or a complete lack of grave goods.[117] Despite this, vessels were placed in a significant number of graves — most often *unguentaria* or jugs. Determining the ritual nature of these objects and the purpose for which they were buried is one of the greatest challenges of late Roman and early Christian archaeology. Significant formal similarities that are observed in pagan and Christian rites essentially obscure or even prevent the identification of the religion of the deceased.

A discussion on the types of graves used by the Christians in the Late Antiquity period would require a separate study, but it is worth mentioning that older tombs were not refrained from being used, even if they were decorated with pagan iconography.[118] Moreover, archaeological finds indicate the burials of pagans and Christians within one grave.[119]

[110] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, p. 51.
[111] Makropoulou 2007, p. 451.
[112] Makropoulou 2007, pp. 444, 453, 455.
[113] This approach is also reflected in Roman law — in the case of several burials of the remains of one person, "(...) this [place] will have a religious character, where the most important thing is laid, i.e. the head, which becomes [our] likeness and thus we are recognizable" [translation mine]: *De religiosis et sumptibus funerum*, p. 39.
[114] Makropoulou 2007, p. 444.
[115] Makropoulou 2007, p. 456.
[116] Makropoulou 2007, p. 456.
[117] Bowen 2003, pp. 170–171; Davis 1999, pp. 195, 199.
[118] Bowen 2003, p. 170.
[119] Johnson 1997.

Commemoration

Just like today, on the funeral day, and on occasions when it was customary to visit the deceased, graves were decorated with flowers, most often roses, violets, or garlands.[120] This practice is reflected in the decorative motif of festoons hanging from the walls of tombs, often appearing in the painting decoration of the burial chambers.[121] In the period before Constantine's conversion, this practice was rejected by the Christians as pagan;[122] however, as in the case of wreaths or incense, the influx of neophytes in the fourth century caused the adaptation of pagan customs.

Another way to honor the memory of the dead was to burn candles or incense on the grave.[123] The practice of burning candles there during the day was prohibited by the Synod of Elvira in Spain around 306 under the pain of ex-communication.[124] Such a severe punishment is motivated by "troubling the holy spirits". In turn, the lack of a ban on smoking candles at night suggests consent. In the context of using cemeteries, canon 35 of the same synod is also interesting: "Women are forbidden to keep vigils in the cemetery because serious offenses are often committed under the pretext of prayer".[125] On the one hand, this indicates the habit of visiting graves not only on specific anniversaries and holidays but also on other days, and, on the other hand, it indicates the use of the separation of the necropolis from human settlements for purposes insulting the Christian morality.

Most often, however, the relatives of the deceased gathered at the grave on specific days after the funeral. According to ancient Roman tradition, on the day of the funeral, *silicernium*, i.e., a *de facto* wake, was celebrated on the fresh grave. Already nine days later, another feast (*cena novendialis*) was held in the same place, after which the period of mourning officially ended. The next grave meals were eaten on the anniversary of the deceased's birthday and on holidays such as *parentalia* (February 13–21), *lemuria* (May 9, 11, 13), or *rosalia* (May–June).[126] Some of these holidays were rejected by the Christians but *parentalia*, dedicated to the ancestors, continued to be popular. In addition, in the Christian tradition celebrations took place on the third, seventh, ninth, and thirtieth or fortieth days after the funeral and, contrary to pagan customs, on the anniversary of the death, known as *dies natalis* — birthday to a new life.[127]

On the day of the funeral and on the abovementioned anniversaries and holidays, ritual meals were eaten on the graves or in specially designated places within the cemetery.[128] Examples of special rooms or triclinia (roofed or not) intended for feasting are known from both the Roman and early Christian periods.[129] In case of some tombs their vault was leveled flat from the outside, thus creating a platform on which feasts were held.[130] Meals of this type were a frequent motif depicted in both pagan and Christian tomb paintings,[131] and the remains of vessels near graves are typical finds.

Archaeological research shows that the graves remained open until the ritual meal, held immediately after the funeral ended. This is evidenced by consumption remains and vessels, some of which were found in the cemetery area, and some in a burial chamber untouched since Antiquity.[132] Only after the funeral feast was over, the vessels were placed in the grave. Moreover, excavations

[120] Toynbee 1971, pp. 62–64.
[121] Marki 2006, p. 124.
[122] Rebillard 2012, pp. 125–126.
[123] Caseau 2007, p. 85.
[124] *Acta synodalia ab anno 50*, p. 55.
[125] *Ibidem*.
[126] Toynbee 1971, pp. 50–51, 63–64.
[127] Saxer, Heid 2014, p. 673; Koukoules 1940, p. 62. First mention of *dies natalis* comes from about the half of the II century: "(...) the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy, and to celebrate the birth-day of his martyrdom (...)" — *Martyrdom of S. Polycarp*, p. 209.
[128] See Spyridakis 1950, pp. 163–166; Jensen 2008.
[129] Marki 2006, pp. 63–64; Toynbee 1971, p. 51.
[130] Nalpandis 2002, p. 536. Marki 1989, p. 99.
[131] See Jensen 2008.
[132] Makropoulou 2001, pp. 266–267; Makropoulou 2007, p. 466.

indicate not only the consumption of food in cemeteries but also its preparation. This is indicated by the discovery of a portable ceramic stove containing ashes and burnt oyster shells.[133] The consumption remains, as well as fragments of tableware, amphorae, etc. are popular finds in the areas of cemeteries, both Roman and early Christian. Feasts are also evidenced by stone benches and marble tables, sometimes discovered as elements of the funerary complex.

Another custom practiced by a family visiting a grave was making libations of wine, oil, milk, or honey,[134] and offerings of grapes, olives, grains of wheat, or acorns.[135] These sacrifices were made by pouring a little liquid or throwing food directly on the grave or the ground in its immediate vicinity, but there were also special structures built for this purpose together with the tomb. These were small openings in the vault or cover of the burial chamber, which provided access to the interior of the grave [Fig. 4]. It was not uncommon for them to connect to a lead or ceramic

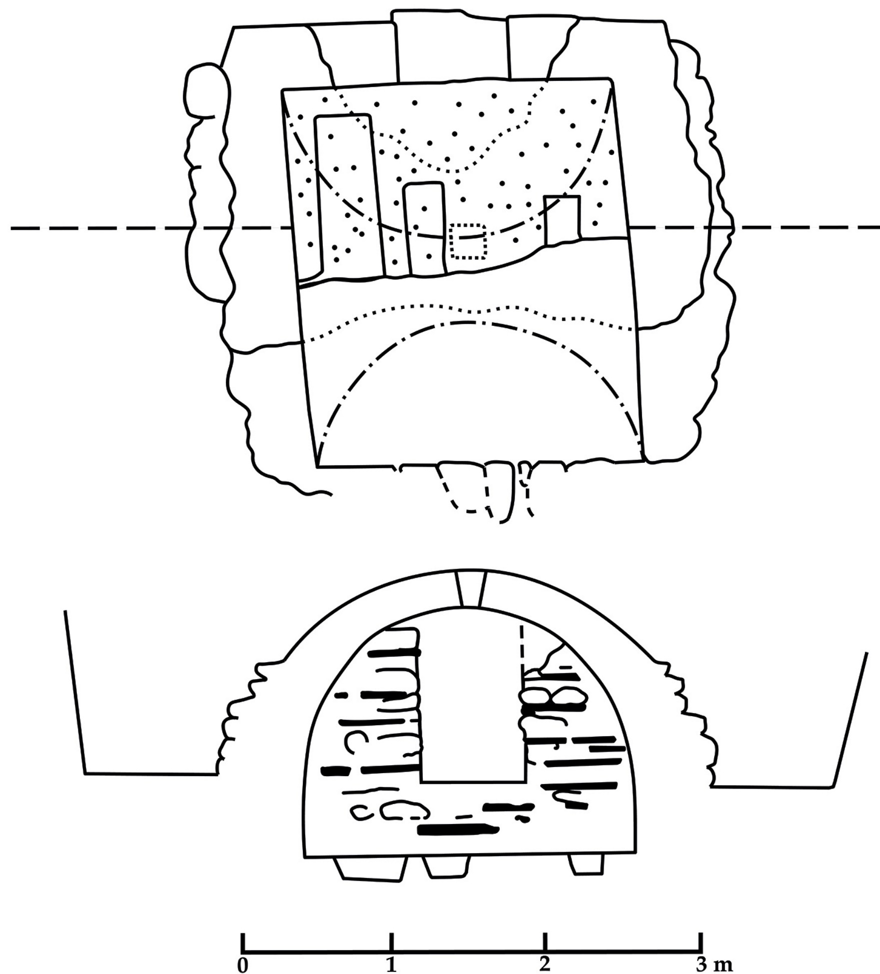

Fig. 4. A tomb with an opening for libations. Eastern Cemetery in Thessaloniki (Marki 2006, p. 207, fig. 173, redrawn by the author)

[133] Makropoulou 2007, p. 468.
[134] Marki 2002, p. 206.
[135] Makropoulou 2007, p. 466.

pipe that ran directly to the burial. This solution ensured receiving the offering by the dead, and, as it were, feeding his soul,[136] thus achieving the goal of the ritual. Such installations were used by both Christians and the followers of traditional religions.[137]

Conclusion

The funeral rite practiced by the Christians in Late Antiquity was adopted with only minor changes from the Greco-Roman tradition. Common elements included preparing the deceased for burial by closing his eyes and mouth, washing and anointing the body with fragrant oils, its public display, laying a wreath on the deceased's head, a solemn procession to the resting place, or libations. Flowers, candles, and incense performed a similar role in the funeral ceremony. Both Christians and pagans celebrated grave feasts on specific holidays and anniversaries, thus it can be said that the funeral rite did not change fundamentally with the change of religion. The changes made by Christians were, for the most part, intangible — funerals took place during the day, singing of psalms was introduced, the practice of placing everyday objects in the grave was limited, and the traditional blood sacrifice was banned. Even so, most of the burial practices were rooted in the same beliefs about the existence of the soul in the body or the ritual impurity of the deceased as in the previous centuries. Determining the religious affiliation of the dead is, therefore, extremely difficult based on the funeral rite and the grave inventory alone.[138] In this situation, the most important factor indicating the Christian identity of the deceased is the location of the grave within the cemetery associated with a cult building, and the painting decoration of the burial chamber with Old and New Testament motifs, a Christogram, the "Good Shepherd", etc.

It is worth noting here that the image of the Christian funeral rite that emerges from written sources, although internally consistent (or perhaps because of it), certainly does not reflect the entire complexity and local diversity of funeral customs practiced by the Christians in the Late Antique period. It should, therefore, be borne in mind that some of the abovementioned elements of the funeral rite may not have taken place in specific circumstances, in different periods, places, or societies. In individual communities, they could have taken place in different ways, in a different order, in a different place, or with the use of specific accessories. Certain rituals were also performed differently for clergy, monks, and laity. The same applied to people with a high or, on the contrary, very low position in the social hierarchy. The Christian religion was undoubtedly a common factor for most communities in the Mediterranean basin, but the force of its uniformity was not significant enough to supplant local traditions and blur cultural differences between different peoples. Therefore, the scheme of dealing with death in Late Antiquity presented in this article does not, and could not, take into account the entire complexity of the funeral rite in this period. It was the sphere of beliefs, that determined the practices to which the body of the deceased was subjected — the belief in the religious impurity of death required washing and anointing the body; for Christians, faith in the resurrection was the decisive factor in abandoning cremation and the dominance of the skeletal rite, while the belief in the existence of the soul within the body after death required offerings and libations. Late antique syncretism and intermingling beliefs, on the one hand, make this period fascinating, on the other, make research difficult for archaeologists,

[136] Lucian, *On Funerals*, p. 119.
[137] Spyridakis 1950, p. 160; Makropoulou 2007, p. 465, note 88; Toynbee 1971, p. 37; Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 380; Trakosopoulou-Salakidou, Panti, Basileiou 2018, pp. 523, 528, 530; Sterrett-Krause 2017, p. 51; Marki 1989, p. 101.
[138] Poulou-Papadimitriou, Tzavella, Ott 2012, p. 379.

who are often unable to determine the religious affiliation of the deceased based on the funeral rite alone. Still, despite the challenges in interpreting the evidence, archaeological research is crucial for the progress of future studies in this field.

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