

Homeric Funerals: The Literary and The Archaeological

As a poem concerned largely with war and *kleos*, it should come as no surprise that the *Iliad* contains a multitude of deaths within its lines. Likewise, the *Odyssey* details not only the voyage of one man back home from the Trojan War, but also the ideas of homecoming and the inability to return from war- often as a result of death- as more general concepts. It is, therefore, through the lens of death and ancient Greek burial customs that we may analyze the two Homeric poems; using a synthesis of text analysis and material culture allows us to explore a deeper connection between both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the burial practices of the Bronze Age through the Archaic Period in Greece, as attested through archaeological excavations.

In this paper, I will be discussing the idea of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as oral compositions by comparing the burial practices in the works to the practices as attested in the archaeological record. First, I will address the instances of funerary practices in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, focusing on the formulaic circumstances of funerals as well as their significance. I describe the ways in which a funeral is meant to progress, as well as the potential dangers of digressing from these stages. Then, I analyze burial practices in Bronze Age and the Archaic Period in Greece and the surrounding region, with detail as to the similarities and differences of the practices as laid out in the works of Homer.

The funerals found within the pages of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are formulaic, allowing deviation only under specific, proscribed circumstances. This poetic formula is staged: first the body is washed and laid out on a platform, then burned on a pyre after a variable number of days, next, the bones are gathered up into an urn, and finally, the earth is mounded up on top of the urn and a grave marker placed above. Neither the practices of the Bronze Age nor the ones of

the Archaic Period match this description in its entirety. Instead, what has been found in excavations of the Bronze Age Aegean are a mixture of tholos tombs and chamber tombs, with the number of inhumations far outweighing the number of cremations (Ruppenstein 2013). While cremations were being practiced in Bronze Age Asia Minor (Musgrave 1990), this alone cannot account for the funerary practices of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the texts show very little variation between the practices of the Achaeans and those of the Trojans, like one might expect if the texts were following purely Bronze Age rituals. Some excavations of gravesites have uncovered several similarities, primarily in Lefkandi in Euboea, dating to the Protogeometric Period no later than the 9th century B.C.E. (Popham 1993), and Salamis on Cyprus (Blackwell 2010), dating to around the 8th to 6th centuries B.C.E., although neither of these are a complete match to the textual practices. Meanwhile, while the burial practices in the Archaic Period were more variable- both cremations and inhumations are represented, sometimes at the same sites- inhumations continued to be more popular, especially when it came to adults; importantly, for those individuals that were cremated, the remains were buried in ceramics (Alexandridou 2016).

As a result, funerals as portrayed in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* appear to be poetic inventions resulting from a synthesis of several centuries worth of practice. I argue that the oral composition of the two poems is reflected in this lack of direct parallels to any time period with regards to the funerary customs.

Works Cited

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