

Dead Soldiers and Death Oracles: Dark Tourism in Ancient Greece

“Dark tourism” is generally defined as travel to sites associated with suffering, death, or the macabre (Sharpley 2009, 5). In the modern world, popular dark tourism destinations include battlefields such as Gettysburg, sites of disaster like Ground Zero, and scenes of genocide such as the killing fields of Rwanda. Some scholars in the field of dark tourism studies maintain that travel of this sort is a postmodern sociocultural phenomenon—a product of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Lennon and Foley 2000, 3). However, humans have long been drawn to places of death and disaster, and dark tourism arguably has its roots in antiquity.

Two prominent sites of death-related travel are the *tumuli* at Marathon and the *nekuomanteion* at Heracleia Pontica. Of the many monuments commemorating the battle of Marathon, the most poignant are the *tumuli* on the battlefield which contain the remains of the military casualties. The Athenian dead were cremated and interred in a large tumulus (*soros*) that was approximately 15 m. in height, 50 m. in diameter, and accompanied by casualty lists. Nearby a smaller tumulus, whose original dimensions are unknown, likely contained the inhumed remains of the Plataeans who fell in battle. The monumentalization of the plain of Marathon ensured that the battle, as well as its victims and their symbolic capital, would be ensconced in the cultural memory of the 5th century Greeks and their descendants. Even though the plain of Marathon immediately attracted visitors who had honored the fallen like heroes (Thucydides 3.58.4), travel to the site was officially ritualized approximately 350 years after the battle when the Marathon dead were declared heroes (*IG ii*² 1006, 26, 29; Pausanias 1.32.4).

Attested in literary sources as early as the 5th century BCE, *nekuomanteion*, which translates to “the place of necromancy” or “the oracle of the dead,” refers to a death-oracle sanctuary. Typically, death-oracle sanctuaries, like the one at Heracleia Pontica, were located in

caves that were believed to contain entrances to the Underworld. There, at the threshold between the realms of the living and dead, Greeks sought to conjure and consult the spirits of the deceased. Travel to these places was arduous as they were tucked away in remote locations far from urban centers; nevertheless, the promise of a genuine encounter with the dead enticed visitors to the sites until at least the 4th century CE (Ogden 2001; Friese 2010).

Thus, using the Marathon *tumuli* and the *nekuomanteion* at Heracleia Pontica as case studies, this paper explores the evidence for the practice of dark tourism in the ancient Greek world. It begins with an introduction to dark tourism and ancient travel, then carefully considers ancient travel to the *tumuli* at Marathon and the *nekuomanteion* at Heracleia Pontica, ultimately arguing that travel to these sites constituted a premodern form of dark tourism.

Bibliography

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