

The Development of the Early Christian Concept of Death and Burial Rites from Greco-Roman Culture

In this paper I set out to describe both the general thoughts of death as well as the rites of burial, aspects both shared and unique to each, of the pagan religions of the Greeks and Romans and the monotheistic religion of early Christianity. I will also attempt to explain the reasoning behind the differences between these cultures, paying particularly close attention to the concept of death itself and its rituals. Using the evidence provided below, I propose that the changes in burial rites stemmed from Christianity's removal of the fundamental concept of permanence in death.

I. The Pagans¹

Death, in much of the literature and artifacts of both the Greeks and the Romans, is described with one absolute trait: permanence. An individual could either be deified or he would eventually die. Many of their myths made that an understandable, yet depressing, fact of life. A very poignant example of this belief would be the story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus

¹Since the beliefs concerning death for the Romans are similar to those of their Greek counterparts, I thought it appropriate to address them simultaneously, separating them when necessary in order to highlight the contrast between the very private nature of the Greek funeral when compared to the very public nature of the Roman funeral. Additionally, the descriptions of the rights of burial are kept to those most commonly practiced for the sake of a general comparison. For more detailed reviews on these concepts and rights, see D.C. Kurtz and J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971) and J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

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is the most cunning man among mortals who, after fooling both Hades and Persephone and escaping death twice, was given the eternal punishment of “roll[ing] a boulder up a mountain on his shoulders in the underworld only to have it roll back down past him when he reaches the top.”² This circumstance put Sisyphus in an eternal cycle of failure, rendering him unable to scheme his way out of the underworld once more. Death was seen as a necessary part of the human life cycle, and nobody, not even the gods, could permanently stave it off.

During life, there was a heavy emphasis on keeping the body whole. Even medicine, to both the Greeks and the Romans, partially revolved around attempting to return the body to the state of equilibrium and causing it no additional harm.³ This is attributable to their belief that mutilating the corpse brought it dishonor.⁴ In battle, nothing was more mentally strenuous to warriors than the threat that their bodies, should they be killed, would be stripped, damaged, or not receive proper burial. Any negative action performed on a deceased individual translated

² Stephen Trzaskoma et al., *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 234.

³ Hp., *Jusj.* 22-23, 25-28: “I will not use the knife, not even, verily, on sufferers from stone ... and I will abstain from all additional wrongdoing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bond or free.” Text used is Hippocrates, *Ancient Medicine; Airs, Waters, Places; Epidemics 1 and 3; The Oath; Precepts; Nutriment*. Loeb Classical Library, No. 147, Translated by W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁴ At Hom. *Il.* 22.249-354, before their final battle begins, Hector asks Achilles to proclaim a solemn oath with him to return the loser’s body back to his people, having only stripped it of the armor. Achilles flatly refuses, and when Hector entreats him again with his dying breaths, offering Achilles a ransom of all of Troy’s riches by Priam, should his body be returned without further mutilation, Achilles refuses once more. Rather, Achilles swears to let him be torn apart by the dogs, no matter what punishment he may receive from the gods for such dishonor.

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as a dishonor to his very soul, and that soul, if the body did not receive a proper burial, could not pass on to the underworld or be at peace.⁵ In order to guarantee the proper burial of loved ones, individuals both as insignificant as Antigone and as politically powerful as Priam, risked even their own lives. Even outside the realm of myth, well into the Roman period, a proper burial was necessary. Furthermore, proper upkeep of said grave translated into proper respect of the dead. Pliny the Younger, when writing to his acquaintance Albinus about his own visit to the grave of a man whom he respected highly, Verginus Rufus, wrote:

"I repented having seen it, afterwards: for I found it still unfinished, and this, not from any difficulty residing in the work itself, for it is very plain, or rather indeed slight; but through the neglect of him to whose care it was entrusted. I could not see without a concern, mixed with indignation, the remains of a man, whose fame filled the whole world, lie for ten years after his death without an inscription, or a name."⁶

Death also stood as an eternal equalizer of those who once lived, as only an individual's soul, none of his possessions, came with him to the underworld after his death. When Odysseus visited the underworld⁷ seeking guidance from

⁵ Patroclus, at *Il.* 13.70-73, speaks to Achilles in his dream, asking him, "Bury me quickly so I may pass through Hades' gates. The spirits keep me at a distance ... and will not allow me to join them." Translation from Homer, *Iliad*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 442.

⁶ Helen Tanzer, *The Letters of Pliny the Younger* (Bridgeport, CT: Braunworth & Company, 1936), 157.

⁷ It is worth mentioning that the underworld, in both Greek and Roman culture, was a physical place which a person could visit, if he was provided guidance. This belief is not very surprising because cultures surrounded by large bodies of water, as both cultures were by the Mediterranean, often relate life and death to the journey of a ship, with the afterlife being a destination on that journey. As I will later explain

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Tiresias, he also met many faces of the deceased whom he once knew. Among them was the greatest of the Greeks, most honored in the Trojan War, Achilles. After Odysseus spoke to him of both his great honor in life and his death in battle, Achilles replied, "Don't try to sell me on death, Odysseus. I'd rather be a hired hand back up on earth, slaving away for some poor dirt farmer, than lord it over all these withered dead."⁸ Even the most honored individuals were humbled after death. The few exceptions were given to those whom the gods decided to grant access into the Elysian Fields, known as the Blessed Meadows to the Romans. Nevertheless, those selected for this privilege were unable to leave, as their mortal life was forever over.

Belief in an afterlife can also be seen in writers later than Homer. For example, in Plato's *Republic*, the author outlines death and the afterlife in the Myth of Er. According to Er's account, upon death, souls were recycled into new lives, washed clean of all the memories of their previous lives. Each and every soul, from the poorest farmer to the heroes of legend, such as Odysseus, were given the same chance of a better life in their new existence. Additionally, in philosophical school of Epicureanism, founded in 307 BCE and transmitted into the Roman world by poets such as Lucretius in his *De Rerum Natura*, death is an absolute end. Upon death, the soul, its fate tied to that of the body, would disintegrate into its constituent parts, serving as the building blocks of other substances. Each and

this same belief also translated into the mindset of the early Christians, though without the aforementioned physical manifestations.

⁸ Hom. *Od.* 11.488-491. Translation from Homer, *Odyssey*, Translated by Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 172.

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every person, no matter their greatness in life, would be dissolved into the same microscopic particles upon death.⁹

Finally, though their two worlds were primarily separated, the spirits of the underworld and mortals could still affect each other. After the aforementioned meeting between Odysseus and Achilles, Odysseus also encountered the spirit of Ajax. Odysseus had been chosen over Ajax to lead the Greek forces at Troy after the death of Achilles. After he saw him, Odysseus remarked:

*Only the ghost of Telamonian Ajax stood apart, still furious with me because I defeated him in the contest at Troy to decide who would get Achilles' armor. ... That contest buried Ajax, that brave heart ... I tried to win him over with words like these: ... but he said nothing. He went his way to Erebus, to join the other souls of the dead.*¹⁰

Aeneas went through similar hardship upon meeting Dido in the underworld in Vergil's *Aeneid*, as his actions in leaving Dido led to her suicide and hatred for him. Additionally, it was believed that shades or ghosts of the dead could visit the human plane when justice or retribution was necessary for past action. For example, in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the spirit of Agamemnon set his son, Orestes, on the task of killing his own mother, Clytemnestra, in retribution for Agamemnon's murder by her hand. Beliefs such as the interaction between the living

⁹ Throughout Book 3 of the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius argues that the mind, body, and spirit are both intermingled and mortal: "When all the covering of the body is broken up, and the breath of life is cast forth without, you must confess that the sensations of the mind are dissolved abroad, and the spirit too, since the two exist by union" (3.591-594). Translation from Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*. Translated by W.H.D Rouse. Loeb Classical Library, No. 181 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

¹⁰ *Od.* 11.543-564.

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and the dead reflect the ritual practices necessary for the proper passing of the soul into the Underworld. Furthermore, the potential for retribution from the spirits of the deceased provided an additional incentive to take especial care of the body.

In Greek culture, once an individual died, he had to undergo certain rites before he could be buried. Immediately after death, whoever was with the deceased at that time, preferably a family member or close friend, was expected to shut the eyes and close the lips as a sign of honor and respect. After this, in order to avoid the spiritual and legal defilement that came with handling a corpse, only women very close to the deceased, and over the age of sixty, if possible, would initially handle the corpse. They would begin by washing the body, anointing it with oil, dressing it, and adorning it with flowers and other accessories. This procedure took place on the first day after the individual had died, and significant importance was held in its taking place at the home in which he died. This aided in preventing his body from being removed by those wishing to establish themselves as heirs of the deceased. This process, called the *πρόθεσις* or "laying out," normally lasted roughly one day, "only long enough to confirm death."¹¹ After the body had been wrapped in a shroud, raised on a bed or some similar flat, high-legged structure, and propped by pillows to give it the appearance of sleeping, friends and family could pay their last respects to the deceased and issue the funeral lament.¹²

¹¹ D. Kurtz and J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 144.

¹² While men were expected to remain fairly composed, raising their right hands, palm outwards, toward the deceased both here and at the funeral, women were able to truly lament. This was done by "tearing

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The morning after the *πρόθεσις*, or three days after the death of the individual, the body was taken out of the home on a quiet procession through the side streets of the city before dawn by the men who were followed by women of the appropriate age and relation. Upon arriving at the grave, the body would be lowered into the ground and covered with minimal ceremony, and a blood sacrifice would be made over the ground in order to both purify the land and honor the deceased once more.

Once the burial concluded, the family would return to the home of death for nine days.¹³ During this time, the family would partake in a gathering, known as the *περίδειπνον*, during which the dead was spoken of, and on the ninth day perform additional rites at the grave. Finally, the family would continue to observe annual celebrations in honor of the deceased. Through these practices, the soul was able to properly leave the body, and through the annual celebrations the individual could continue to be honored as he once was in life.

Roman funerary practice had two basic tenets: death polluted an environment and needed purification from the survivors; and each corpse must be granted a burial, no matter how small and insignificant, in order to guarantee that the spirits of the dead be appeased. At minimum, a sprinkling of dirt upon a corpse would be sufficient, but there were many rites

their hair [and] striking their head and breasts.” Kurtz and Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, 144.

¹³ During this time a vessel would be placed outside the home as a notification of both death and the miasma that comes with it. After mourning and purification ended, the vessel would be removed, signifying safety from defilement for those who visited. Kurtz and Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, 145.

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traditionally followed by Romans when both time and finances allowed.

When an individual was near death, he would be surrounded by close friends and family both for his comfort and so that they may express their grief. At the time of death, the nearest relative would impart a final kiss, catching the deceased's last breath and, in Roman thought, his soul, before that relative would close his eyes and mouth for the sake of respect and decency. After this the corpse would be set on the ground, washed, anointed, and dressed for the burial in clothing natural to everyday life, such as a toga for a man,¹⁴ and would have a coin placed in his mouth which served as payment to guarantee safe passage for his soul into the underworld by Charon, the ferryman of the dead. Once these rites were accomplished, the body would be held up on a funerary bed facing the door in the same way as in Greek ritual.

After the body of the deceased was laid out for visitation, the duration of which could be for up to seven days, professional undertakers would take the body to its place of inhumation or cremation in a public procession followed by the family members who were clad in black and carried torches. Due to Roman law, burials had to be performed outside the city, even if the body were to be cremated, in order to avoid defilement within the city and to keep it sanitary. The remains of most Romans would then be interred in one of a series of various tombs located along the roads outside the gates of Rome. In the case of inhumation, dirt would be sprinkled over the corpse, while in the case of cremation, a portion of the ash or its

¹⁴ From this point those close to the deceased would shout his or her name intermittently until the body was disposed of. This was known as the shout of death, or *conclamatio mortis*.

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receptacle would be buried in the ground. In both cases, this was to signify a formal “burial” of the body, allowing the soul to move on in peace. The deceased would then be placed in his tomb, and the family would perform any additional private customs as they desired.¹⁵

After the funeral had concluded, the family was required to perform several practices both to purify themselves and to honor the deceased. Generally speaking, a pig would be sacrificed at the grave to both purify the land and legally designate it as a grave. Both the family and the home of the deceased then would undergo rituals of purification. After nine days of mourning, a large meal, called the *silicernium* would be held by the family in honor of the deceased. Finally, when the purification and mourning was complete, a final libation would be poured at the grave to appease the soul of the deceased, with various festivals, including the birthday of the deceased, celebrated throughout the year in order to honor the spirit of the deceased.

The most obvious difference between the funerary rites of the Greeks and Romans is in their degree of publicity. Participation in Greek funerary customs was limited by law to only the family and close friends of the deceased, with much of the funeral lamenting restricted to the familial home.¹⁶ On the other hand, Roman funerary customs were much more public affairs, during which the duties of preparation and grieving could be passed on to professionals, such as hired female mourners,

¹⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of these rites, see J. Toynbee. *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), especially Chapter 3: Funerary Rights and the Cult of the Dead.

¹⁶ Kurtz and Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, 144.

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or *praeficae*. Even in the case of especially important individuals, such as powerful government officials, all citizens could receive an order, known as the *funus indictivum*, to participate in the processions.¹⁷ The more people that attended these ceremonies lessened the chance of punishment from the gods due to lack of piety and respect for the dead. Therefore, by making funerals a more public matter, the amount of worshipping individuals and honor given to the dead could increase dramatically.

It is under these customs that Christianity first began to grow. While the faith's doctrine does differ vastly from that of the Greco-Roman pagans, deviating too far from the established customs, or *mos maiorum*, of the early Roman Empire could lead to the swift extermination of unorthodox practices. The Christians, in order to ensure their own survival and growth, had to gradually develop their own customs from these. By utilizing similar ideology and not immediately distancing themselves from common Greek and Roman practices in their religion's infancy, they could remain at least somewhat unmolested from governmental interference as their beliefs began to spread throughout the Mediterranean. However, as their numbers grew and they began to face persecution for their beliefs, a change in their ideology was necessary in order to ensure the continued growth of the faith despite such persecution. This insurance would arise from the removal of the idea of death's permanence.

¹⁷ Toynbee, *Death and Burial*, 45.

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II. The Christians¹⁸

Initially, the early Christian concept of death was very similar to that of the ancient Greeks and Romans: a sleep.¹⁹ However, this sleep was not thought of as an eternal, everlasting end after which nothing else could be accomplished. With the examples of both Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus, both of whom Jesus Christ raised from the dead, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ Himself, the sleep of death loses its permanence. By extension of this, death ceases being an end and becomes a new beginning for the soul in its next journey toward the afterlife. Thus even the resting place of the dead took on a new meaning. It became known as the *κοιμητήριον*, literally a sleeping-room for the dead from which our modern word "cemetery" derives, as the dead would all one day be resurrected with the coming revelation, rather than the *domus aeterna*, or eternal home.²⁰ By removing the negative stigma of permanence on the sleep of death which was held in the vast expanse of the Greco-Roman world for many centuries, the apostles of Jesus Christ could be sent into the lands of their persecution without the fear of death stopping the most devout of believers from spreading His word. In fact, many devout believers, notable examples being Saints Perpetua

¹⁸ Most of the information in this section comes from Alfred Rush, *Death & Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1941).

¹⁹ In *Daniel* 12:2 of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Old Testament to Christians, it is stated that the dead are "multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth" (New International Version).

²⁰ In *Revelation* 20 and 21, for example, it is said that all the dead will be resurrected, and they will all face judgement of the actions they committed in life. Each person with his name in the Book of Life – that is, those whose actions proved themselves pious believers – will live eternal life with Christ, whereas those whose names are not in the book will experience a second death, burning for eternity in a lake of fire. This is only one of a number of passages in the New Testament where Jesus talks about the promise of eternal life.

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and Felicitas,²¹ became martyrs through their faith, facing torture and execution while they spread the teachings of Christ. Without this removal of fear, the persecution of the Christians might have led to the church's extinction long before the message of Christ could ever be shared.

While death itself was seen as a sleep to the Christians, they also had a distinct view of the afterlife which differed from the Greco-Roman beliefs. After an individual died, the day on which he died became known to the church as his birthday because the day signified the start of his journey to the master who has called him. Because of this view, death was to be celebrated rather than despised. Furthermore, death was the answer to the Lord's summoning an individual back home. In many instances, the individual on this journey would be guided and protected by angels on the path toward heaven, giving the strength and faith to overcome the horrors around him as he journeyed to his beckoning master. Completing the goal and arriving at the realm of the master gave way to eternal paradise for the believers, serving to reiterate the goodness that comes from death. As Jesus Christ said: "whoever believes in [the son of God] shall not perish but have eternal life."²²

While this version of the afterlife for all pious believers is unique to Christianity, it does share many aspects of Greco-Roman paganism. While death was seen by them as negative because of its being a permanent end to life and its accomplishments, the Elysian Fields, which existed for heroes and individuals especially favored by the gods, show a very close

²¹ For the full story of these two saints, there are several texts and translations. An easily-accessible translation can be found, in both textual and audio form, at <http://www.biblicalaudio.com/perpetua.htm>.

²² *John* 3:16.

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resemblance to the Christian heaven. Angels serve the place of the border-crossing guide for the believers, as Hermes (Mercury) or Aphrodite (Venus) did for the chosen few. These agents of God would steer them away from the evils wishing to stop them, such as the lions and serpents engrossed in Greco-Roman culture. In many cases, this journey was seen as a journey by boat, led by the church or Christ Himself in the same way that Charon ferried the souls of the dead across the river Styx into the underworld. This idea stems from the traditions of the region, as “[i]n ancient cultures human life was often symbolized by a ship and the course of life with all its attending perils was compared to a voyage. Especially was this true of peoples whose culture was influenced by the proximity of some great body of water.”²³ All of these cultures were intimately involved with the Mediterranean Sea, making a ship narrative almost expected from them. However, this narrative for the Christians serves the additional purpose of establishing Christ as the ark of salvation, much like Noah’s Ark in *Genesis*, for His followers in a world flooded with evil and sin, and His resurrection and ascension to Heaven serves as the return of the ark to the east. This return to the safe place, that is Heaven, serves as the symbol on many funeral inscriptions as a ship having finally found safe, everlasting harbor.

Many rites were performed by the Christians before death in order to prepare both the body for burial and the soul for departure to Heaven. The main rites performed were the stretching out of the limbs, especially the feet, of the dying individual, administering the Viaticum, the catching of the last breath, and the imparting of the final kiss.

²³ Rush, *Death & Burial*, 44.

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The stretching out of the limbs originates from the ancient belief that the soul did not immediately leave the body upon death. Instead, the soul would leave gradually, beginning from the feet and ending at the head. This form of thought more than likely came from an empirical conclusion given by Lactantius, early Christian author and advisor to Roman emperor Constantine I, that individuals “breathe forth their spirit only gradually and that the soul takes its flight from the body only as the various members grow cold.”²⁴ Therefore, by straightening the limbs during the time of death, they could both provide an unhindered exit for the soul from the body while fixing the body in an appropriate form for burial before rigor mortis could make such actions difficult.

When the time of death was close, it was of significant religious importance to deliver the viaticum, a supply of provisions or an official allowance of money for a journey, to the individual. However, the Christian viaticum was not the same as that practiced by the Roman pagans that involved placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased individual in order to guarantee voyage by Charon into the underworld. Rather, the cultural need to guarantee safe passage into the afterlife in antiquity pulled this tradition into the Christian community. Since safe passage to Heaven was guaranteed by the angels who assisted pious followers of the faith, Christians felt the need to guarantee the individual was freed from sin upon his death. In order to guarantee this, their viaticum consisted of performing the Eucharist for the individual just before his death. After drinking the “Blood of Christ,” the “Body of Christ” would be placed in the mouth of the individual, both taking the place of the coin for

²⁴ Rush, *Death & Burial*, 92.

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Charon and guaranteeing the individual to be free of sin upon his death. This guaranteed that the individual was nourished for his upcoming journey. This safeguard was – and still is – so highly regarded that even individuals suffering public punishment were guaranteed to receive it before their death, and its administration before death was equally as important to the point where dying individuals would repeatedly partake of the viaticum in order to guarantee that it was in their mouths at the time of death. This is because the viaticum became useless after death.²⁵

Finally, the dying received a final kiss at the time of death, during which it was believed that his last breath contained his soul. This rite, which stemmed from the pre-existing pagan tradition of trying to catch the individual's soul, however, came as more of an act of affection for a fellow believer who is worthy of praise for his pious life. Since the Christian concept of death took away the permanence and fear of death, handling the body of the deceased in this way was not accompanied by the legal and spiritual defilement which occurred when handling the dead in both Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. Therefore, a "kiss of peace"²⁶ could be given to the deceased by all the members of a congregation because, as Pseudo-Dionysius said, "the kiss of peace is given to the dead because everyone who has lived a godly life is dear and worthy of praise in the mind of all who are god-like."²⁷ However, this specific rite was very local in nature, having developed as very

²⁵ This comes from *Matthew* 26:26, the first administration of the Eucharist, where Christ tells His disciples, "Take and eat; this is my body." By this logic, the dead cannot partake in the Eucharist because they can no longer eat.

²⁶ Rush, *Death & Burial*, 103.

²⁷ Rush, *Death & Burial*, 104.

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popular in Milan and Syria while the Council of Auxerre in 578 had completely forbade the practice while dealing with the superstitious customs of the Teutonic tribes and the Gallo-Romans, since the kiss already had significance in their pagan rituals.²⁸

After death, the first rite of the deceased was to have his eyes and mouth closed by whoever was present, though preferably those closest to the deceased. This custom, having carried over from previous pagan cultures, was so much a given that it often went unmentioned. While violent outbreaks of grief did sometimes occur, the *conclamatio mortis* of the Romans did not carry over into the Christian faith, as death itself loses its sorrow in their beliefs. After this step, the limbs, if not already straightened before death, were then straightened, with the arms crossed and hands laid over the breast, sometimes in the form of a cross. Once this was completed, relatives or the local community would lay out and adorn the body of the deceased in preparation for the upcoming funeral, as it was still considered culturally important that the dead always be given the respect of a proper burial.

Just as in the Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Jewish customs from which Christianity rose, the next step was the washing of the body of the deceased with warm water. The corpse would then be anointed or, less commonly practiced, embalmed, however to what extent these two practices were done was more based on local tradition rather than the faith itself. These two traditions stemmed from the same need as that of other ancient cultures in burial: the need to counteract the horrid stench of decay while a body was prepared for its burial.

²⁸ Rush, *Death & Burial*, 105.

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Additionally, Christians would be buried in either white linens or clothes they were most often known for wearing in order to represent everlasting purity and their piety in life, respectively. However, when at all possible, it was preferred that special garments be made or procured for the burial of the deceased, as was done for well-known individuals in the Greco-Roman tradition. Excessively rich garments were frowned upon due to their dissonance with both the Christian aspects of humility in life and the understanding in their faith that believers should clothe themselves humbly.²⁹ At the conclusion of all of these rites, the body of the deceased was ready for its funeral, and the soul was on its way to the Kingdom of Heaven.

While the body was now ready for burial, the early Christians did not hold much emphasis on the act. By their beliefs, the body was just an empty vessel after death, so they were fairly unconcerned with the method by which it was disposed of. However, the body needed to be buried, not cremated. This stems from the Jewish customs in which cremation was not practiced. Even Christ Himself was buried, and the Christian practice is to follow Christ in all ways. Additionally, cremation was the mainstream Roman practice at the time, and the Christians sought to minimize their exposure and comparison to pagan rituals as much as possible. Finally, the resurrection meant that the dead would one day rise again, so completely destroying the body would dishonor that ideal.

²⁹ I am refraining from going into detail concerning the Christian wake because it is a concept that underwent much evolution after Constantine granted legality to the church. However, it is worth noting that mourning garments, while not completely illegal, were frowned upon by the church, and candles were frowned upon due to their connotation in pagan ritual. Furthermore, the wails of mourning were replaced by the singing of Psalms in honor of the Lord.

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In conclusion, subtle changes in specifics, driven by their beliefs, aided early Christians in establishing their own funeral rites. Those changes were put into practice as a result of one fundamental difference between Greco-Roman culture and the Christian faith. That difference was the Christian understanding that was not a condition from which there was no return. On the contrary, they understood death as merely a stage through which we all must pass in order to return to an eternal life alongside their Creator. While it can be argued that several of the Greco-Roman mystery religions, such as the Eleusinian cult of Demeter and Persephone, have their own removal of death's permanence in granting of everlasting life to the initiated,³⁰ these mysteries were also very secretive in their rites and could not be practiced by those who could not afford the pilgrimage. However, Christianity is not only accessible to the poor, but it also places them ahead of the rich and powerful.³¹ Christianity provides brotherhood and eternal life to all, and this characteristic, along with the removal of permanence, allow its followers to spread and share the message of Christ wherever they may go. As St. Augustine says in the sixth line of his *Sermon 215*, "*Sola haec fides est quae Christianos ab omnibus hominibus discernit et separat.*"³² This faith alone is what distinguishes and separates the Christians from all men.

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³⁰ G. Wagner, *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries* (London, UK: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1967), 69-70.

³¹ See the stories of The Widow's Offering in *Mark* 12:41-44 and The Rich and the Kingdom of God in *Matthew* 19:16-30.

³² August., *Sermo*. 215, 6 (*PL* 38, 1075) quoted in Rush, *Death & Burial*, 248-249.

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