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# Greek and Roman Perceptions of the Afterlife in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*



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## Abstract

*This study is a literary analysis of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and Virgil's Aeneid. Of specific interest are the interactions of Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas with their beloved dead. I focused on what each party, both the living and the dead, wanted and the results of their interaction. Methods included reading passages from the ancient Greek and Latin texts and integrating these with historical evidence of beliefs in the mid-eighth century BC for the Greeks, and in the late first century BC for the Romans. Homer significantly influenced the religious beliefs of the Greeks, while Virgil did not similarly affect Roman religion.*



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Homer's *Odyssey* says that death "is the way of mortals, whenever one of them should die, for the tendons no longer hold flesh and bones together, but the strong might of blazing fire destroys these things as soon as the spirit has left the white bones, and the soul, having flown away like a dream, hovers about."<sup>1</sup> People have always been fascinated by death and the afterlife. From scholarly research to American cinema, everyone has his or her own idea of the afterlife. For example, the movie *What Dreams May Come* serves as one modern take on a classical theme: Robin Williams' character can interact with his wife after his death and he is even able to travel to the underworld from heaven to save her. The concept of the living interacting with the dead is still a salient topic in our age. We can easily see how present depictions of the interactions between the living and the dead affect our ideas and behaviors regarding death, and it is also important to understand how ancient literature affected ancient societal beliefs.

In order to understand how Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* affected their respective societies, I examined the interactions of central characters, both living and dead, and how these actions were reflected in their respective society's beliefs. In addition, however, the Homeric epics heavily influenced the religious beliefs of the contemporary Greeks, affecting their ideas of the dead, the prevalence of hero cults, and their burial methods. Although the Romans had religious ideas that were represented in the *Aeneid*, Virgil's portrayal of the Homeric view of the underworld depicted in the *Aeneid* had no similar effect on their beliefs. The different impacts that these epics had were reflected at varying levels of society – from deep spiritual movements to political manipulation.

The Greek idea of the underworld was more typical of the account from the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad*. Alan Segal notes, "The Greeks apparently concluded that

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1. Homer, *Odyssey* 11.218-222, trans. Jeff Adams.

since death comes to all, Hades was the final destination for all. ... The virtuous and the sinners all lead the same life in Hades."<sup>2</sup> However, Segal's view of the afterlife is the Homeric description shown in the *Iliad*, which is interesting because it does not take Greek Mystery Cults into consideration, especially the Eleusinian Mysteries. This mystery religion was very popular in practiced Greek religion beginning in the eighth century BC.<sup>3</sup> And according to Walter Burkert, the mysteries were an aim at some form of salvation through closeness with particular gods.<sup>4</sup> So contrary to the statement by Segal, the archaic Greeks did believe in special treatment or punishment of the dead in the underworld as is represented in Homer's *Odyssey*. Though there is not obvious evidence depicting Homer's influence on mystery cults, we should never disregard the importance of the Greek mystery religions.

While it appears that Homer's writings had a direct effect on the beliefs of the Greeks, the inverse was true for the *Aeneid* – the beliefs of the Romans had more of an effect on the writings of Virgil. Homer's works had a profound influence on the ideas of what became of the soul after death. The Homeric representation of the *psukhe*, or the mirrored image of the dead, became the predominant view of the dead.<sup>5</sup> Homer depicts the spirits of the dead as transparent images of their former earthly bodies. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* influenced the Greeks' idea of what occurred after death, but also went so far as to reach into many other aspects of the religious beliefs of the Greeks in the eighth century BC. The Roman conceptions of the living interacting with the dead remained an important belief, even with the rejection of the Greek view of the afterlife. Although the Romans rejected this view of the afterlife, they held a similar idea of the spirits of the dead and how they could affect the living. J.

M. C. Toynbee states that "the dead and living can affect one another mutually. ... They [*Manes* or spirits] were capable of aiding their descendents, but were harmful and spiteful to the living if kinless and neglected."<sup>6</sup> The purpose of worshipping the *Manes* was to appease them so that they would not harm the family.<sup>7</sup> However, these beliefs were set down long before Virgil's *Aeneid*.

According to Denis Feeney, Virgil was "interested in making the Homeric experience part of the Roman experience."<sup>8</sup> The representations of the underworld by Virgil mimic Homer's idea of the underworld and afterlife. Once again, while there are major differences in the representations of the underworld in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, Virgil was clearly inspired by Homer in his rendition. In Homer's epics, the underworld is represented as being a tangible location, where living men are able to travel. Virgil took the concept of the tangible underworld and ran with it, depicting a heaven and hell hidden from the average mortal. In book six of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas travels into the hidden entrance of the underworld only with the help of the prophetic priestess Sibyl.<sup>9</sup> In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes the underworld as having different areas for the different types of deceased. For instance, Menelaos will spend eternity in the Elysian Fields because he is Helen's husband, the son-in-law of Zeus. The Elysian Fields, situated at the ends of the earth with the rest of the underworld, was considered to be paradise where the privileged resided. Also in the *Odyssey* is the representation of the mortals Tityos, Sisyphus, and Tantalos, whose punishments carry over into death, where they are continuously tortured. Even though the underworld is mentioned by Patroklos in book 23 of the *Iliad*, he never mentions anything concerning other levels or special areas of Hades' kingdom. Although in the *Iliad* the underworld is not described

in as much detail as the *Odyssey*, this does not mean that the beliefs were different. According to Zaidman and Pantel, "The Greeks certainly had a graphic and often geographical conception of the world of the dead."<sup>10</sup>

While the Greeks believed in the idea of this afterlife, the Romans did not. R. M. Ogilvie declares:

We are too apt to think of the Greek myths of Styx and the kingdom of Hades. This (despite its use by Virgil in *Aeneid* VI) was certainly not taken seriously by Virgil's contemporaries. ... But most people, while rejecting the Greek vision of the after-life, cautiously accepted the hope or the fear that the spirit did in some sense survive.<sup>11</sup>

Ogilvie clearly states the Romans did not believe in the representation of the afterlife depicted in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Though their beliefs were not the same as in the epic, the Romans had a vast variety of ancestral rituals and festivals that embodied their spiritual enthusiasm and proved to be quite complicated:

The religious ideas expressed in [Virgil's] poetry are highly complex. Book VI, for instance, combines a wide range of traditional elements from Homer, Pindar, and Plato together with the mystic idea of a descent to Hades, ... and fuses all these with specifically Roman beliefs and practices. The resulting vision would have puzzled most Romans.<sup>12</sup>

It would be difficult to fit an entire description about the vastness of Roman religion at this historical point within this analysis, but descriptions of the established practices are useful in exemplifying the relationship between the literature

<sup>2</sup> Segal, Alan F. *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *The Homeric Hymns: Translation, With Introduction and Notes*. Translated by Diane Rayor. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Burkert, Walter. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Zaidman, Bruit, and Schmitt Pantel. *Religions of the Ancient Greek City*. Translated by Paul Cartledge. 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Toynbee, J.M.C. *Death and Burial in the Roman World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Mikalson, Jon D. *Ancient Greek Religion*. Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Feeney, Denis. *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Virgil. *Aeneid* 6. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Zaidman, Louise Bruit, and Pauline Schmitt Pantel. *Religions of the Ancient Greek City*. Translated by Paul Cartledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Ogilvie, R.M. *The Romans and their Gods in the Age of Augustus*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1969.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

and its societal affects. For example, the Roman belief concerning the welfare of the dead can be seen in the two festivals conducted every year. During the Parentalia, a festival held February 13-24 to honor the welfare of dead parents, the temples were closed and no marriages could be celebrated. Another festival, the Lemuria, was devoted to the worship of all deceased family members. The Romans believed that the spirits stayed in a semi-existent state near or even in the tomb in order that they could receive the nourishment to keep them 'alive.' This caused the families of the deceased to enclose a good meal (*silicernium*) inside the tomb.<sup>13</sup> These few customs demonstrate the importance of the Roman belief in an afterlife and the actions they would carry out in life in order to satisfy the dead.

Furthermore, the convictions that both the Greeks and Romans held concerning ritualistic behaviors surrounding death can be seen in the writings of both Homer and Virgil. For example, a theme depicted in all three of these epics is the problem that arises when the dead lack proper burial. According to N. J. Richardson, "[Greek] beliefs about what happened to a person at the point of death and afterwards were never fixed and always remained a subject for debate."<sup>14</sup> But in the mid-eighth century BC, the Greeks possessed a belief that there was a necessity for burial based partly on what happened when the deceased were not buried properly. Virgil uses the parallel Greek idea of the dead urging a necessary burial to enter the underworld: "Charon allows no souls, before their bones rest in a tomb, to cross the dreadful shores and hoarse rivers."<sup>15</sup> In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' unburied companion Palinurus asks to be buried so he may "rest in a quiet place."<sup>16</sup> The predominant Roman method of burial was cremation,

but at least one bone, which represented the entire body, needed to be buried.<sup>17</sup> If the deceased were properly buried, they would then descend into the underworld to join the rest of the dead.<sup>18</sup> This is precisely what the Greeks had believed at least 700 years earlier. If the dead were not buried with the proper rites, they would not be allowed to enter the underworld, but wandered the earth with an evil will.<sup>19</sup> In book 23 of the *Iliad*, Patroklos returns to earth to ask Achilles to bury him "as quickly as possible."<sup>20</sup> He later states that he will never return from the underworld once he was given his rite of fire.<sup>21</sup> This means that once his funerary rites were completed (i.e. his cremation) he would be able to pass through the gates of Hades. The Greek idea was that the dead were unable to rest in peace until they were buried, and once they were buried, they would not return to the living. They had many different ghost stories, in which the dead harass or curse the living or exact revenge.<sup>22</sup> In the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus travels into the underworld he sees his companion Elpenor who says, "Don't go and leave me behind unwept and unburied when you leave, for I may become the gods' curse to you."<sup>23</sup> In the *Iliad*, when the wretched soul of Patroklos is refused entrance across the river Styx, he tells Achilles to "bury me as quickly as possible so I will pass through the gates of Hades. The spirits, the shades of dead men, keep me at a distance, they will never let me pass over the river and mingle with them. But I have wandered just as I am by the wide gates of Hades."<sup>24</sup> Both of these quotes have similar aspects that the contemporary Greeks believed. After death, if the dead were not buried with the proper rites, they were not allowed access into the house of Hades. In addition, as stated in the *Odyssey*, not providing an

appropriate burial could cause a curse from the gods. Walter Otto shows that the Greeks took drastic measures to make sure that this would not happen:

In Homer ... the spirit of the dead could be admitted to the realm of shadows only after burning ... Anthropology moreover supplies cases where a dead man whose ghostly vexation had become intolerable was actually exhumed and burned so that he should no longer be troublesome.<sup>25</sup>

Without the proper kind of burial the dead could communicate or haunt the living. The Greeks believed that the dead still had power in the sense that they could affect their living ancestors, causing families to carefully carry out every funerary ritual in order to eliminate the possibility of a spiritual vexation.

Taking this interaction one step further, the idea of the living and the dead conversing while being unable to touch was another major factor in the religious rituals of both societies. Together with speaking to the dead, the attempts at embracing each other depicted in Homer's epics affected the rituals in which the Greeks conducted their burials. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we see Achilles, Odysseus, and Agamemnon attempt and fail to embrace a loved one. In the *Iliad*, Achilles requests the spirit of Patroklos to "stand close to me, holding each other for only a little while and take satisfaction from the pain of mourning. ... And he [Achilles] reached out his hands to him, but he could not grab him."<sup>26</sup> Similar to the *Iliad*, in the *Odyssey* there are different times where the dead and the living attempt to touch one another. Agamemnon attempts to embrace Odysseus, and Odysseus strives to hold his

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, N.J. *Early Greek Views about Life after Death*. Edited by P.E. Easterling and J.V. Muir's *Greek Religion and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Virgil. *Aeneid* 6.327-328. Translated by Jeff Adams.

<sup>16</sup> Virgil. *Aeneid* 6.371. Translated by Jeff Adams.

<sup>17</sup> Fowler, William Warde. *The Religious Experience of the Roman People: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Augustus*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, INC, 1971.

<sup>18</sup> Wissowa, R.K. 191. From William Warde Fowler's *The Religious Experience of the Roman People: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Augustus*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, INC, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler, William Warde. *The Religious Experience of the Roman People: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Augustus*.

<sup>20</sup> Homer. *Iliad* 23.71. Translated by Jeff Adams.

<sup>21</sup> Homer. *Iliad* 23.71-76. Translated by Jeff Adams.

<sup>22</sup> Zaidman, Bruit, and Schmitt Pantel. *Religions of the Ancient Greek City*. <sup>23</sup> Homer. *Odyssey* 11.71-72. Translated by Jeff Adams.

<sup>24</sup> Homer. *Iliad* 23.71-74. Translated by Jeff Adams.

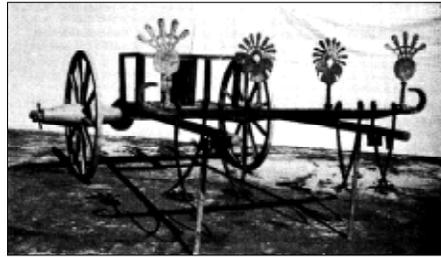
<sup>25</sup> Otto, Walter F. *The Homeric Gods: The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion*. Translated by Moses Hadas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1954.

<sup>26</sup> Homer. *Iliad* 23.97-100. Translated by Jeff Adams.

dead mother: “But I [Odysseus], considering it in my heart, wished to hold the spirit of my dead mother. Three times I rushed to her, and my heart desired to take her, and three times she flew out of my hands like a shadow or a dream.”<sup>27</sup> In the *Aeneid*, similar to the representation in the *Odyssey*, Aeneas attempts to embrace his father. “Then attempting three times to place his arms around his father’s neck; and three times the shade escapes the useless grasp.”<sup>28</sup> Exactly like Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, he is unable to embrace his father. It is difficult to say how exactly these stories affected the people at that time, but the desire to reach out and hold a deceased loved one is a concept that carries over the ages. Rather than suggesting a particular belief that yields a specific behavior, the inclusion of these passages may signify a deeper human connection and a desire to understand death better.

Perhaps the inclusion of such emotionally charged interactions are played out in society through the beliefs regarding funerary rights and rituals. The circulation of Homer’s epics greatly influenced Greek society in that there were attempts to imitate the magnificence of heroic funerals. This is the most evident at Cyprus in the town of Salamis at the royal chamber tombs. Because of the process of archaeology, the customs are known in great detail. These rituals can be compared closely with the rituals of Patroklos’ funeral in the *Iliad*. Patroklos’ funeral was one of magnificence: his body was conveyed on his chariot and sheep and cattle were slaughtered with him.<sup>29</sup> Achilles offered the following gifts: amphorae filled with honey and oil, twelve sacrificed Trojan captives, the ashes collected of Patroklos in a gold urn wrapped in a cloth, and finally a large mound of earth heaped over his remains. Though the archaeological findings in Cyprus were not exactly the same as Patroklos’ funeral, the findings seem to be heavily influenced by

Homer’s epic. Many different tombs have been found in Salamis, and in tomb 2 a large cattle bone was discovered. Another tomb produced the skull and forelegs of a sheep. Most of the tombs in Salamis were filled with large amphorae, one of which was inscribed with olive oil. Although there was no evidence of horses being burned with them, in every



tomb there were the skeletons of at least two horses and the chariot poles. Instead of burning their horses with the royalty, the royal family burned chariots with the deceased. In tomb 79 of Salamis, all the metal parts from one chariot survived, and the clear impressions of the wood allowed for a fairly certain reconstruction of the chariot.<sup>30</sup> The most significant evidence of Homer’s influence on these imitated funerals is the inhumed male skeleton found in tomb 2, whose hands were bound together.<sup>31</sup> This is clearly not a man willingly giving his life in honor of the royal family. In tomb 1 there was a cauldron of bronze with traces of cloth on its inner face. Tomb 3, the largest mound, was heaped ten meters over the dead.

Attica is the only other region in the Greek world with any sign of epic influence on burial customs.<sup>32</sup> From the evidence provided by J. N. Coldstream, it is difficult to believe that these funerary rituals were not inspired by the widespread performance of the Homeric epics. Although the performances of Homer’s epics were widespread, Attica and Cyprus are the only places where the Homeric influence is clear. This does not mean that these two places were the only two regions that were influenced by

Homer, only that these are the only places where the evidence is obvious enough to illustrate a strong Homeric influence.

The widespread performance of the Homeric epics also changed the way the Greeks viewed the world in which they lived. J. N. Coldstream uses archaeological evidence to show that the Homeric epics altered their view of the heroic past, and sparked the success of hero-cults or hero worship. Coldstream also uses archaeology to depict how some burials were strongly influenced by accounts of heroic funerals from epic poetry. By using this archaeological evidence, Coldstream reveals that the Homeric epics influenced the Greeks’ religious beliefs.<sup>33</sup> These cults spread throughout mainland Greece at the same time the *Iliad* began to circulate in Greece, circa 750 BC. Before the mid-eighth century, little, if any, respect was given to the tombs of their ancestors. The Homeric tales also influenced the rush of votive offerings at the Mycenaean tombs.<sup>34</sup> Ian Morris tells that there were known occurrences of heroes being worshipped prior to Homer’s *Iliad*, but these were rare incidents. Meta-analytic research has shown a sharp increase in hero-cults after the circulation of Homer’s epics. During Homer’s time the prevalence of hero-cults increased from five to thirty-seven over one century.<sup>35</sup> The drastic increase in the amount of hero-cults is remarkable in such a short period of time. According to J. N. Coldstream:

Blegen observed that none of the Prosymna votives was earlier than the late eighth century...These cults were suddenly instituted in the late eighth century because that was the time when the Homeric poems were beginning to circulate over the mainland of Greece. . . . Many more of these votive deposits have been found in several regions; they lend powerful confirmation to the theory put forward by Farnell and

<sup>27</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 11.204-207. Translated by Jeff Adams.

<sup>28</sup> Virgil, 6.700-701.

<sup>29</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 23.150-257, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

<sup>30</sup> J. N. Coldstream, *Geometric Greece: 900-700 BC*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Ian Morris, “Tomb Cult and the ‘Greek Renaissance’: The Past in the Present in the 8th Century BC,” *Antiquity* 62 (1988): 755-756.

<sup>36</sup> J. N. Coldstream, “Hero-Cults in the Age of Homer,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 96 (1976), 9, 10.

Cook.<sup>36</sup>

As Coldstream states, all of this evidence provides strong support to Farnell's statement from 1921, that hero-cults were "directly engendered by the powerful influence of Homeric and other epics."<sup>37</sup>

The major affect of the *Aeneid* on the Roman people can be seen not in the religious realm, but rather the political arena. Although the beliefs of the Romans were drastically different from the beliefs portrayed in Virgil's epic of Aeneas, "the poem, with its national myth, made its way into the heart of the regime's religious program."<sup>38</sup> The Romans did not view this story as historically accurate – they were affected by its use in the state religion. In late first-century Rome, there was a statue of the goddess Venus, the mother of Aeneas, which recalled Augustus and Julius Caesar's descent from the goddess.<sup>39</sup> This was clearly propaganda used by Augustus; he was able to use his ancestry from the goddess to persuade the Empire to support him. In the porticoes of a Roman temple was a series of statues depicting Augustus' ancestry. On one side was Aeneas, and on the opposite side were the kings of Alba Longa, who were Augustus' family line. At this temple, Augustus was proclaimed the heir of the gods.<sup>40</sup> The ancestry of Augustus to Aeneas is represented in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas' dead father Anchises is showing Aeneas all the future rulers of the Roman world. Anchises states, "This is the man who you frequently heard promised, Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who establishes the golden age in Latium again."<sup>41</sup> This is a fortunate boost for Augustus' claim as the heir of Venus because the *Aeneid* was the pinnacle of Roman literary works. All citizens would have known of Virgil's story, and this would have been free advertising for Caesar Augustus to further spread that he was a descendent of Venus. Even though the Roman citizens did not literally believe the events that occurred in the *Aeneid*, "Cicero fully admits the historicity of Aeneas"<sup>42</sup> and

his goddess mother. Virgil was correct in his assessment that Augustus would rule in the golden age of the Roman Empire, because after his death, the Roman government slowly began to deteriorate.

We can see that the Greeks were strongly influenced by Homer in their beliefs about the dead, their ideas of heroes through the development of hero-cults, and even in the way some Greeks conducted funerals, through the representations of the Homeric epics and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Virgil depicted different religious beliefs in the *Aeneid*; however, the Romans were not religiously affected by his epic. While there are similarities and differences in the representations of the underworld and the dead in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, it is important to remember that the Romans did not share the Greek beliefs of the afterlife. The interactions of these characters are similar to what we might do—try to embrace a loved one, or carry out one last wish for them. Historical research is important because we are not looking at a set of isolated incidents, but actions that shaped societal beliefs. The relationship between these works of literature and their lasting affects is complicated, but it is clear that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had a strong and long-lasting affect on the religious beliefs of the Greeks. Although Virgil's *Aeneid* did not have a religious affect on the Romans, it was the single most important piece of literature in ancient Roman history. ■

<sup>37</sup> L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 340

<sup>38</sup> Graff (1988), 68; Zanker (1988), 193-210; Sheid (1993). From Denis Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume I, A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Virgil, 6.791-793.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?: An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 50.

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