

Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: End-of-Life Rites in Ancient Art – Presentation by Dr. Vassilka Nikolova (Medical University - Sofia, Bulgaria)

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear from Dr. Vassilka Nikolova from the Medical University Sofia, Bulgaria. Her presentation is entitled 'End-of-Life Rites in Ancient Art'.

Hello to everyone. And thanks to the organizers for inviting me.

Before I start, I would like to say three things about me so that you can understand why this. I graduated classical studies, which means Greek, Latin, archaeology, ancient art and so on. But because at that time in my country, Bulgaria, it was a communist rule, with Latin or Greek, you could not work except in medical universities to teach diagnosis. So I started my job at the Medical University and did my PhD in medicine. And doing all this research about ancient concepts of Plato, Hippocrates, on human body. Of course, I read some other things. You cannot just go to a certain quotation without reading the other things around. And little by little, I was, how to say, impressed by some similarities described in ancient authors and some rituals which I was seeing in my country around me.

Now about this: Bulgarians are Greek Orthodox. When I say Greek Orthodox, it is important, because Russian Serbians are Orthodox of another kind. Greeks and Bulgarians are Greek Orthodox, which means that we have the same rituals. And what happens? I was reading these ancient sources and everything was described there. How did it happen? Then Romans, because at first our area was also with Greek influence, all the stones, all the life was going in ancient Greek, like these small city-states. And then Romans came, and they took everything from the Greeks and transferred it to the rest of Europe. So these traditions, which were typical for antiquity in Greece, were transferred to other countries. There was a question from Portugal before. Of course, Roman legions were there.

Why am I saying this? Because what we know about the rituals associated to death, in our case, we know it from three major sources. This is the written text. No matter if it is a drama, a comedy, philosophical work, or something like that. There are a lot of descriptions. We also know it from the pottery, which is one type of pottery called the black-figured one, in which you can see different rituals described, and also the special type of pottery, which is white, made of white clay, and which is especially pottery that was put on the graves. And there you see... Both about the rituals, and also about the mythological figures. And the third one, these are the so-called burial stelae. Stelae, you will see, is a stone, like we put now on our graves. It is put in the place of the head. But on this stelae, they used to show, and you will see a lot of them, the dead person in a position doing something typical for everyday life. For instance, if it was a midwife, you can see her taking out the baby. Usual for this stelae, is one thing, and you will notice it, I'm saying this before I start. So that when you look at the pictures, I'm not going to explain them one by one. You know what it is about. Usually on the stelae,

you see sitting the figure of the deceased. The loved ones are around. Usually the spouse is in front, holding hand like that. So that to say last goodbye. And from this stelae, you can learn a lot. How did they dress? What were their hairdos? What were their furniture? You will see. You will see how many different types of chairs, for instance, they had. And, well, at the start, of course, we have these three. But from another point, we have Greek mythology, with which everything started, and which was the primary topic for all the artistic presentations. And this mythology was later on, in some diverse forms, more scientific, embodied in the philosophy and law. So, speaking about the concepts, which underlie this, mythology, philosophy and law. This is the major concept in Greek thinking. It's a social reproduction, so to say, in the mind. This is the Dichotomy. The principle of Dichotomy. Which means split into two. Everything is seen like this. Sky and Earth. Who were the first in mythology? Uranus and Gaia. The sky and the Earth. Representations of male and female principle. Always the male is the good one. Female is the bad one. So, we can put a lot under this. We can say light and dark. Right and left. And many, many others. And you will see this embodied in the concepts about the rituals. We say sexism. Well, politically speaking, politically correctly speaking, probably yes. But if we don't accept and understand it, then we fail to understand all the symbolic systems on which is built the European, Western European mind about how to explain different procedures. How to understand the social life. The roles of people in social life. This symbolism is essential to be known.

And when we speak about Dichotomy, one very important about that is the concept of pollution and catharsis. Pollution or to make something dirty is based on the Dichotomy about the boundaries between human and divine. And because there is another Dichotomy about soul and body, and when a person dies, the soul goes out of the body, which means there is kind of divine aura around, which is not to be approached by humans. But humans have to approach. So they do something which is ultimis. In antiquity, there is no concept of sin. This is Christian one. In antiquity, there is allowed and forbidden. Something which is allowed for the gods is forbidden for the humans. And when there is a divine realm the humans are not allowed to mess with it. But now, when the person dies, they have to. So they got polluted. They do something which is ultimis: not allowed. And they put on themselves kind of sin, if we speak with our later Christian concepts. So, you can see here different steles and you can see what I told you. earlier about this. So, this is the deceased one, the wife, and if we have a third person, usually it is the elderly child. A tomb of a child presented with the favorite toys and the pet. In Greek, the word for that is telos, one of the words, which means both end and purpose. So, philosophically, that was the end of life and at the same time purpose of it. Because the soul will be then transformed to another body and transform there all the good things it has learned throughout the previous life. You can see other steles here.

And Plato, in his philosophy, viewed the human nature and put it most precisely in fact in the basis of the religious concepts in European religion, both Catholic and Orthodox. He viewed, of course, the dichotomy of the human-body. That the body, the female principle. After that, it is decomposed and ashes to ashes, as you know. And the good principle, the soul, the male principle, which goes out, makes this divine aura at the moment of death and sometime after it, it stays. And this aura, the soul, it is enriched, as I said, with all the knowledge, the notions, the beauty and justice which are taken to the higher universe.

You can see here in the middle Lycitos, which is a pottery, especially put on the grave. You cannot put this as a vase at home or use it for water or wine. No. Any other which is not white, you can do that. And you see what I told you. Sitting and shaking hands. The family at the back. The same here, but the

hands are broken. And you see the dresses, the sandals, the different types of chairs, everything. This is the everyday life. How from art we learn the fashion, the furniture, the rituals at home.

These are typical vases because, well, as I said, when somebody dies there are relatives. There are people who have to care about the corpse. They get contaminated. People come to visit. They also get contaminated. And these were put usually outside of the house, full of water, so that they can wash themselves. The water, of course, was not from the house, but from some source far away, so that to be clean. And people were washing their hands so that to go clean. And, yes, as I said, that viewed as a purpose. You live a good life, full of good deeds, and then your soul is enriched. And this is, how to say, the basis of the religion in Europe. You should not do crimes, you should not kill, not steal, and things like that.

These are presentations of the soul, the famous figure of Psyche. In fact, philosophically, the soul was considered to have three parts in different places of the body. The first one was called Thymus, and it was here in the chest responsible for our emotions, courage, fear. The other one was in the diaphragm. It was called Frenes, and the diaphragm was considered to be the organ of mind. That's why still today we have terms which reflect this. Really? Oh my God. Like schizophrenia, oligophrenia, and so on. And the third one was Psyche, which was exactly this nebulous thing around.

Then I will go. These are the two psychopompy. Let me see. Oh my God. Well, the god of underworld had this, which means ah this, the something which you don't see. This is the underworld, the place of the shadows. But he is also called Pluto from the Greek word for rich because people were going there with, how to say, with a coin in their mouth so that to be able to pay their transfer through the river. You can see Hermes and Charon are the two psychopompy, which means mythological figures associated to transfer of the soul from the world of humans to the world of death. And this Charon was something typical and lots of finds with different figures on it.

Here you can see Charon, sorry, Hades is Pluto, the rich one. This is the sign for it, the cornucopia, which is filled with all the riches in the world.

Now, as I said, first of all, the jobs about home, about death, are sexually split. They have gender roles. What men do and what women do. And this is by law. So the first one in Greece, the ruler of Athens, put all these traditions later as laws. Later on, they passed to Rome and became the basis of the first Roman laws, the so-called Roman Twelve table laws and they include preparation of the body. You can see it here, it is called Prothesis. The preparation of the body is done in the house by elderly women who wash the body, then wrap it in cloth, and then put some red on the head with ribbons, with flowers, and place it on a bed, a pillow under the head, legs facing the door. And the corpse has to stay there for 48 hours, so that to be quite sure that the person is dead. On the third day, come people to visit. Men approach with a right hand in the air. Women stay in black dresses. The mourning is absolutely a must. Those who present and are contaminated to be dressed in black. So, they stay there and they mourn. Usually, the leader of the mourners is the mother or the wife. And later they take the body to the grave, which is called the ekphora. The ekphora is done on.. Okay, three minutes. I have seven slides. Three minutes. Now, see, this is a mourning song it's called Carrion. Usually this carrion from karya. Greek mourning song so they were going to the grave under these tools and women were singing or later they could hire musicians with different instruments when they were going to the grave men were in front, women at the back all in black. Later on they could hire some people who will be the corpse bearers. The burial it was simple they could put the deceased in the grave either in cloth or in a coffin. If the deceased is a child then it is put in a special big vessel, which

is not urn but the body is put in it. Only in Athens they used to you burn the bodies and put urns. When the person was buried there were offerings on the grave and offerings were put in special types of pottery. You can see how it was done. This is the gravestone and they put ribbons, they put flowers or wine as well, some food and.. two minutes.. two minutes okay. And after this finished they go home and do the so called (unidentifiable word), which is the feast. The feast was considered to be given by the deceased as a host to those who attended the funeral so that to thank them. And then everyone going out of the house had to be purified, catharsis, with water, the house had to be purified with water, usually taken from the sea, so that all this pollution to be omitted.

And subsequent rites like we have them up to now. The (unidentifiable word), the ceremony on the third day, then (unidentifiable word) on the ninth day. Then now we have on the 40th day, but earlier it was on the 30th, and all the other rights up to the one year time. And well, you can see this is my favorite uh steller, which is called traveling time because many people consider that this deceased woman is working on a laptop with all the necessary holes in it to get connected. So this was my lecture.

PRIVACY AND DEATH was organized by Felicia Fricke and Natacha Klein Käfer with the support of the Centre for Privacy Studies and the Conference Grant of the Carlsberg Foundation.

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Thank you so much for listening.