

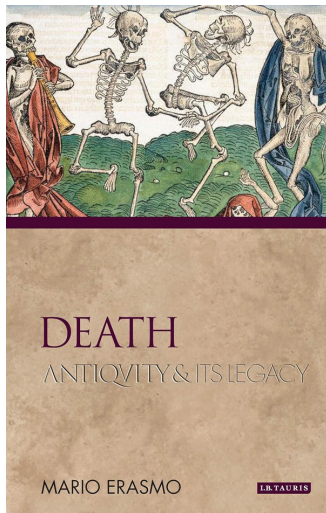
Book Review

Death: Antiquity & Its Legacy

Erasmio (M.), Pp xii + 188, ills. London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2012. Paper, £17.99. ISBN: 978-184885-557-1.

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Constituting part of Tauris' *Ancient and Moderns* series, which aims to illustrate how Greco-Roman antiquity persists in being 'relevant to debates in culture, politics, and society' (p. ix), Erasmio's offering promises a 'semiotic approach' (p. xii) to highlighting resonances between modern funerary customs and Greek or Roman ones. Choosing not to approach his study chronologically, but instead under the broader headings 'Funerals', 'Disposal', 'Location and Commemoration' and 'Cult of the Dead', Erasmio covers a lot of ground. His cornucopia of *exempla* both ancient and

modern is wildly expansive, ranging from the solemn grave *stelai* of the Greeks to the joyous theatricality of jazz funerals in America's Deep South (chapter 1). Yet in arranging his sources more arbitrarily, the work might be better categorised as a descriptive catalogue than a deep dive. Combined with the fact that death is examined chiefly as a social phenomenon, focusing on how mourners memorialised a life instead of delving into why, the finished product is markedly one of breadth rather than depth.

Erasmio's opening gambits in his first chapter ('Funerals') are refreshingly cautious: Cicero's *De Legibus*, he notes – one of the more generous sources attesting to Roman practices – is limited in usefulness due to its proclamation of what cannot be done at memorials rather than what can (p. 10). Acknowledgement of social and wealth biases, and the subsequent endurance of monuments belonging to those more affluent is also pleasing (p. 16). Erasmio's ensuing embarkment, exploring funerary theatricality, is hugely exciting, if at times a little overstated, and invites many seamless comparisons between death and life. Modern funeral homes' floral decorations may resemble gifts brought to their hospital room (p. 11), unmarried ancients' funerals may be rebranded into their 'marriage' with death (p. 21), and ultimately, allegorically, the deceased at a funeral takes on the role of an actor, and their mourners a 'theatre' audience.

Whilst this celebratory approach to mourning is certainly cheerful, the modern anecdotes Erasmio cites at times feel ill-chosen due to their blatant atypicality, and are proportionally skewed such that most cases are US-based. I hesitate, for example, to concede that ash-theft in a home burglary is the primary concern for most mourners, with Erasmio citing only one such example (p. 66) of a home invasion in the state of Georgia in 2010 as means to justify urn-related crimes being a legitimate anxiety for the modern American. Similarly, with an overconcentration of modern celebrity funerals, whilst successful in mirroring the social biases surrounding surviving ancient sources, the examples he cites are noteworthy for their extravagance rather than any societal or ritualistic pervasiveness.

Chapters 2 and 3, 'Disposal' and 'Location and Commemoration', tend to focus more on Roman practices rather than Greek, though there is a general confluence between Greek and Roman identities under the umbrella of 'antiquity', such that comparatively diachronic descriptions of the two are scarce throughout these chapters. This appears to be by design, and he does succeed in suspending distillations where it counts. Chapter 2's assessment of the quandary of whether to bury or cremate due to religious or logistical constraints is especially convincing, supporting his discussion in the previous chapter of the additional cultural predicaments at play for immigrants and diasporic communities (p. 3). However, once again, the chapter's success is diluted by his overuse of modern American examples as paradigmatic, when those of other cultures, where cremation is more prominent, may have been more effective.

Chapter 4 (Cult of the Dead) does a significantly better job of tackling Greece and Rome in parallel, in assessing the stylisation of Greek and Roman monuments (pp. 110–111) and the custom whereby Romans (and not Greeks) might dine graveside (pp. 118–119). Perhaps the most successful implicit thread between the ancient and modern comes in the book's closing sentiment, addressing the Virgilian 'No day shall erase you from the memory of time' quote on display at the National September 11 Memorial in New York. Erasmio addresses the controversy of Nisus and Euryalus as exemplars (and aggressors) only fleetingly, yet concisely enough that it underscores exactly the point his work set out to achieve. Funerals and memorials are not simply markers of loss: they are a means through which mourners can attach their own sentiments to their loved ones' memories.

Erasmio's intended audience is somewhat tricky to gauge, as the weighty onus on modern funerary practices throughout its pages suggests a bid for accessibility among non-Classicists. Whilst it succeeds here, a novice reader may struggle with italicised yet undefined terms such as *prothesis* (p. 21) and an *ekphora* (p. 120). Similarly, Erasmio transliterates, yet provides only paraphrased translations of Greek excerpts. 'It was forbidden by Solon's laws to speak ill of the dead in public', he notes (p. 57), citing *ton tethnekota kakos agoreuein* from Plutarch's *Solon* as evidence. Whilst quibbles over the precision of his translation do not detract from the quality of the points made, the work, I presume, is not designed to be dissected from a semantic standpoint.

In a similar vein, Erasmio makes liberal use of endnotes, only a modest proportion of which comprise original Latin or Greek sources. References to sculpture are routinely relayed in writing,

rendering it difficult at times to envisage the scenes they depict, or indeed the physical scale of certain monuments. His integration of such a wide array of sources is indeed a strength of the work, though such frequent deferral to secondary reading raises the question of whether this work might be better designated as a starting point than a final destination for a reader seeking comprehensiveness.

Volume-wise, readers of this book are certainly provided with the opportunity to learn a lot – an impressive output given the

complexity of death as a topic to handle. Yet given the dominance of modern descriptions versus ancient analyses, Classicists might be better served skimming through and cherry-picking the parts of this work most relevant to them. If supplemented by a sourcebook or compendium of visual sources, I suspect this already ambitious work would only further inspire the contemplative reflection Erasmo may have envisioned among readers.

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