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Kerameikos: Death, Life, and the Vessel

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Honors Capstone – Fall 2022
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The Kerameikos: Death, Life, and the Vessel

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Thesis Introduction:

I intend to examine the Kerameikos district of ancient Athens as a center of life reconciling with death in the Panathenaic tradition. All at once a graveyard, ceramics district, and crossroads, the Kerameikos was a site of community; the domestic aspect of this public space directs a lens of how Athenians processed death communally. Stele from the site offer fascinating insight on Athenian female renown in antiquity; the site acted as the processional origin towards the Eleusinian Mysteries, honoring the relationship between death and life.

Rationale:

Within the past two years of the pandemic, the public processing of death has been shocking. So much goes on behind closed doors, truly an alienating process of grief. While ongoing loss continues, the public reaction waxes exhausted.

My Honors experience at Western is defined the true bisection of life before and during a mass traumatic experience. In a community wracked by death and loneliness, I found myself gravitating to the memories of sunlight and discovery at the beginning of my experience. The exploration of Greece was an immersion into the both the fellowship of honors and the integration of past and present cultural experience.

The rooting center of these memories is the Kerameikos district. As a center of both emotional and tangible crossroads, I remember the Kerameikos as the intersection of my experience and the trajectory of history.

I will use the book *Kerameikos* (Banou and Bournias, 2014) which begins with a foreword by Konstantinos Tasoulas, then-Minister of Culture and Sports of Greece, that encapsulates the necessity of the Kerameikos as an Athenian institution...

“The Kerameikos thus sums up all that was important about Athens: “the praises of the Demos and the Sophists, the difficult, invaluable ‘well done’” as well as “the mean observances, littlenesses, and indifference” that brought men like Cleon to power.” – pg. 11

Thus, I intend to outline the cultural processing of the Kerameikos as a physical lodestone. I will outline the history of both the district’s significance as ritual familiarization with death and my own experience of reconciliation with cultural mourning in the context of my undergraduate experiences.

Essay:

Do you have an idea of where you will be buried? Is it somewhere close to where you live now, or is it thousands of miles away? Is it within a city or tucked into a rural knoll? Does that knowledge make you feel good?

Death often is discussed as a loss, a thievery, or an inconvenience; always, it is inevitable. The central tenets of a multiplicity of religions generally have an accompanying promise of a righteous life and understandable death. It's a formula that has been effective for millennia: do actions seen as correct, and you will receive improved conditions in the hereafter. As a Gen Z American with WASPish privileges, I've come of age in a quasi-Greco-Roman-Puritan society with a focus on digital presence. The glut of information available oddly leads to an overwhelming lack of tangibility. However, the unknown remains.

When learning about a society, the ways of processing death give insight into how the community and the individual cohabitated. From my experience, amongst any group of people, you'll probably find someone who was obsessed with ancient Egypt as a child. Why do people continue returning to antiquity for insight into their own mortality? There abounds a mystery which grasps the psyche: a fascination with what happens to the self, whether body or soul. Religions, creeds, and sundry theories posit answers of great breadth, most attempting to parse a human's role in the cosmos. The morbid often morphs into the grotesque, which then finds reconciliation into the sublime.

I intend to examine the Kerameikos district of ancient Athens as a center of life reconciling with death in the Panathenaic tradition. All at once a graveyard, ceramics district, and crossroads, the Kerameikos was a site of community; the domestic aspect of this public space directs a lens of how Athenians processed death communally. The site acted as the processional origin towards the Eleusinian Mysteries, honoring the relationship between death and life.

To begin this exploration, the defining question is the actual value of the topic. What can the way Athenians processed death provide to enrich our own lives? One might argue that the sheer mass of years and words between antiquity and modernity renders those practices more etiolated than a cactus in a Fairhaven dorm window. Public perception of human capacity being a linear progression lends itself to thinking that Greeks were as two-dimensional as the pages they must inhabit; what could they teach us, all three-dimensional and enlightened? Though the last sentence leant hyperbolic, the question provides an important facet to the foundation of this

essay. The prospect of the differences between the two generates the value of examining the two. What makes a worthy vessel for life and death in the eyes of Western modernity? Of the Attican Greeks? Why is this question worth asking?

Though I'm of the opinion that though both the concept and practice of society has changed between my majority and an Athenian's, a human's capacity for emotion has remained one of the defining features. Since we've taken so much inspiration from the Greeks and Romans for the formation of governing and legislative bodies, investigating how one of those societies approached death is hardly reckless or unnecessary. I also find it important to decipher any practices possible on an individual scale. We cannot fix a society as a whole: our system is meant to uphold the procrastination of death. Thus, in this essay, I will concede the Attican methods of reconciling with death are inapplicable on a societal level (for now). However, this is modifiable on an individual level. How do we open the jar, so to speak, of existing with death? Is there a balance within catharsis?

My intention for this essay is twofold: I intend to investigate how the cultural practices surrounding death within the Kerameikos created a narrative for individuals within the society and explore how to apply those practices on an individual level within the context of my own life and Honors experience. The opportunity to visit Greece through the Honors College defined my initiation into the past four years at Western. When trying to theorize a capstone that would encapsulate the transformative arc of those years, I kept returning to the sunny day in which our group stepped in the mud of the Eridanos, squinting at the rocks of the archaeological site under a nigh-impossibly bright blue sky. The intrigue of why this memory riveted me begat the question of its significance.

When beginning to research the history of the Kerameikos, I stumbled across "The Museums Cycle", an effort by the John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation; an annual series of volumes providing insight into specific museums of Greece, such as the Acropolis Museum, the Archaeological Museum of Delphi, and Mycenae. The 2014 offering was centered on the Kerameikos, and I found the volume fascinating. The authors, Eleni S. Banou and Leonidas K. Bournias, provided an affectionate scope of the site's history, both antique and modern. Supported in translation by Deborah Kazazis, the series of photographs and details of practices intrigued me as a reminder to synthesize not only what the history itself can bring to modernity

but also the telos of the individual in that context. Thus, I began in the manner of Montaigne, “dagger in hand”.

The physical location of the Kerameikos is a vital aspect of its importance. The Kerameikos is an area in Athens, found northwest of the Athenian Agora and named for the *deme* Kerameis, where the pottery artisans used the rich soil from the Eridanos river to generate ceramics; a center of innovation in pottery detail and techniques, the fine vessels produced from this area remain as stunning testament to the artisans’ skills. Kerameikos is now thought from epigraphs to refer specifically to the road that traveled the *deme*, yet most records from Pausanias hence use it to describe the approximate site.¹ Its location as a crossroads gave great eminence to the site.

I was awestruck to learn that the district was also intrinsically associated with death. Until the tour of the site, I didn’t realize the depth of its role in Attican life. Sweaty and squinting, we listened under the luxuriant sun, the gigantic church caddy-corner to the archaeological site looming over us on the warm grass. Fruit trees, small hills, resurfaced edifices dotted the unearthed area which constituted but a snippet of its erstwhile breadth.

The creek that traversed the site, though lazy and small from a warm summer, constituted the Eridanos. This river’s name alludes to one of the area’s uses; the Indo-European roots currently are understood to be a combination of *Ērion* (funerary mound, tomb) and *-danos* (river, moisture).² The clay deposits from this river and its westward flow made it an ideal burial site and clay source to early settlers of the area. Early burials on the north shore of the river are estimated to date as early as the middle Helladic period, perhaps around 2000BCE.³ Grave goods at those early sites feature ceramics, indicating the Minyan’s use of the area. Mycenaean pottery and graves found at the site show its continued use, featuring decorated cinerary urns, stirrup jars, and lethykoi.⁴ A shift from cremation to interment accompanied the beginning of use for the southern banks of the Eridanos during the Proto-Geometric period; notable as well was the organization of graves around societal standing. Female graves, perhaps those of priestesses, boasted a rich variety of grave goods, denoting their importance.⁵ This concurrence with

¹ Eleni S. Banou and Leonidas K. Bournias, *Kerameikos*, trans. Deborah Kazazis (Athens: OLKOS, 2014), 17.

² *Ibid.* 18.

³ *Ibid.* 29.

⁴ *Ibid.* 30.

⁵ Banou and Bournidas, *Kerameikos*, 40.

contemporary graves of other Athenian cemeteries as well as those found in the sacred site of Eleusis is an intriguing indication of female power and renown; to be thus honored in death presents a culture of high esteem for those women, a respect for their knowledge.

To further elucidate the importance of the Kerameikos to the Athenians, its use as a crossroads is essential. The Kerameikos was the processional origin for the trek from Athens to Eleusis, the center of the cult of Demeter and Kore in Attica. The Sacred Way, or *Heira Hodos*, was thus an essential trailhead for the Greater Eleusinian Mysteries, indicating the importance of the site as a nexus. Indeed, excavation of Eleusis has yielded Mycenaean-style megarons dating to around the late Helladic; this suggests to some controversy that the cult of Demeter began around this time.⁶ These yearly events are still shrouded by the secrecy to which initiated Athenian citizens were held; this essay will not attempt to parse the specifics of the rites of Eleusis, but rather note the impact this practice had on the identity of the Kerameikos. As the point of origin for the procession, those not initiated into the Mysteries could witness those myrtle-crowned pilgrims as they followed the road behind sacred objects of unknown identity, perhaps ceramic figures.⁷

Though the construction of the Themistoclean wall bisected the Kerameios, the walls had two notable gates: the Dipylon and the Sacred gates. This site denotes the crossing of the threshold, an honored beginning to a journey within the self and with those around them; the narrative of the pilgrimage echoes Campbell's monomyth. Not only did postulants, merchants, and goods travel through the gate, so did the Eridanos river, reduced to a chortling creek by the time my tennis shoes followed the route those would take. In my reflections from the time in Greece, I noted that the Kerameikos still held an enviable location in the city, which ironically hindered the developments around the area. "Through exploring the Kerameikos and discussing the building rules that surround the area, I began to think about how modern Greeks absorb and digest the history of the region." In hindsight, I was trying to reconcile the importance of the site with the modernity that was surrounding it: a watchful church, bright graffiti, and concrete buildings encircling the little oasis of turtles and birds. This nucleus of Athenian life, dotted with the ceramic fragments of celebration or ostracism, was unearthed unto an alien world. Thus, this essay began to brew.

⁶ Kalliope Papangeli, *Eleusis: the Archaeological Site and the Museum*, (Athens: OLKOS), 2002, 304.

⁷ *Ibid.* 32.

Why not explore the perspectives of the folks who, for centuries, found comfort and community in the *Kerameikos*? If the role of the community is to care for the participating individual, then choosing a model of death that is witnessed creates the strongest foundation in which to further remembrance. The allure comes from the promise that if you follow these rites, create these graves, have the associated items such as stele and amphorae, you will not be alone. It's the reminder of what you're participating in, and that's what strengthens your connection to the group. You work towards your goals while seeing those who achieved greatness before, seeing those you knew honored. The physical location is an essential aspect of this practice.

That orientation on the physical is perhaps what drew me to the memory of the *Kerameikos* in my reflections of the past four years. I wondered at the mass, unspoken trauma. I've always seen shared traumatic event bonds those who are close, individuals banding together – from firsthand during floods in my hometown, seeing communities anneal through tragedies. The sheer isolation of the individual from the community and the efforts to refashion structures of support was the most alienating aspect of this. There was and is so much grief, so much loss of life. Where was it going? How were people finding reconciliation? I could only speak to my own experiences, half of it a praxis of university life. In this vacuum, I found myself in a state of nescient yearning – but I couldn't tell if I was looking for divinity or looking for society.

This listlessness found a home when I stumbled across *Kerameikos*. On a whim, I'd decided to write a paper on the French School of Athens for one of my Winter quarter French courses. In the process, I'd found the PDF of the volume in its entirely translated form, free by the Latsis Foundation's design. I was captivated. I'd spend hours poring over the detailing on the ceramics, the graves to which they belonged, the people who they honored. I found a strange comfort from seeing photographs of the site, remembering the smell of the warm grass and soil, the loam and sun. What drew me to the book? The content clearly was scratching an itch, but I didn't know its origin. What was missing from my life that I craved the stories of thousands of years ago? I'd long been interested in death practices, perhaps due to the Southern Gothic inclinations of my family, hailing from the hollers of north Mississippi. Perhaps if I delved further, I could find some aspect to which I could cleave. I began outlining what stood out to me, unknowingly beginning my capstone.

The capstone had always loomed over me as a final gauntlet of the honors college. Having attended my sister's, I'd always thought that my capstone would be data-orientated, that I'd be

discussing the peculiarities of a protein domain's interactions. My imposter syndrome nested in those expectations. But by the Spring of 2022, I'd reached a point of burnout – raging at the fact that my expectation for the capstone would not make me happy. Though I adore cell and molecular biology, the prospect of having my honors capstone be centered solely on biochemistry felt like a betrayal of my own experience through earning my degree – I wanted my capstone to reflect my Honors experience, not to plod through something I felt like I was expected to do. After the fourth or fifth time I found myself rambling about how cool the Kerameikos was to anyone who'd listen, I met with Dr. Julie Dugger to figure out who a good advisor would be for the project. The Honors trip to Greece was the initiation into my Honors experience, I'd said, and having the opportunity to learn about antiquity with Dr. Goldman had been integral. Who would be good to study this with? At that, Dr. Dugger gave the sound advice of talking to Dr. Goldman, from where we plotted what became a love letter to Montaigne. Pursuing this capstone was liberating, a rejection of self-doubt and a delve into genuine passion, which is the most fulfilling way to summarize my experience within the Honors program itself.

I've previously referred to the physical location of the Kerameikos as one of the most important aspects to its role in Athenian public life. This is also one of the most foreign to modern Western sensibilities. Can you imagine a graveyard as part of Pike's Place market? To assess why I was jarred by this, I took tally of the burial grounds I'd found significant.

Memorials and graveyards, though pervasive, are always physically removed from spaces of life – they are places of alienation, dissociation, or sensationalism. I have only ever once been to my paternal grandmother's grave, twice for my paternal grandfather, barely 4 times in my memory to my maternal grandfathers, and I have not visited my paternal step-grandfather's grave since his interment. Each graveyard in thick Mississippi red clay, atop hills and sequestered in pine trees and struggling grasses. The burial practices of north Mississippi could inhabit an entire other thesis, but this forms my context, living far from my extended families. In contrast, I've had the pleasure of multiple visits to the burial mounds of the Mississippian cultures that inhabited the crook of the Tennessee and Mississippi rivers, barreling down the Natchez trace parkway to visit sundry relatives. Seeing them standing, surrounded either by the crops or the forests. The history still lingering within those mounds had always fascinated me. For example, the battle site of Shiloh during the Civil War took place on the bluffs of the Tennessee river. Crowned with deciduous old growth and burial mounds, the fields and gullies were the site of

horrific bloodshed. When I visited the National Monument at age nine, I was awestruck. What did the soldiers think the mounds held? Did they know, or was it whispered through the camps, or realized as they climbed the mounds to have a better vantage? I startled when I remembered the feeling of visiting the Pyramids of Giza and the nearby step pyramids. Age ten, I was among the literal boatloads of tourists who were setting out to marvel at a site celebrating a good death. All experiences with death I could recall kept me as a spectator to a great mystery.

That, I realized, was why I'd been fascinated by the Kerameikos. I'd never been in such proximity to communal, public grief. Compared to the sunset hills of Mississippi graveyards, the site felt so different. Years of attention and excavation created an estimation of the layout – but past the academics, there was an indelible sense of assurance. Though the city enveloped us, the language and habits of the citizens much changed, the sense of community resonated still. The Kerameikos was a physical lens of experience.

This shed light on a pivotal aspect of my Honors experience – the loss of my paternal grandmother in 2019. Her grandchildren called her Daisy; she was once a formidable Southern belle with a trove of books, artificial flavors, and stories. Cloistered in a nursing home in Jackson, Mississippi, she was nonverbal due to a stroke a year prior. Due to the distance, I couldn't see her as often as I would've liked, which only exacerbated the guilt, anger, and subsequent numbness I felt when, 2000 miles away, I received the call. Looking back, the journey to Nashville, to the remote corner of Chickasaw County, and back to Washington generated the sensation of being *déracinée* – rootless. Though I had the incredible luck of having my sister still in Bellingham, and the friends I'd made through both Honors and other interests, the feeling of alienation was pervasive. I was there, but all I wanted to do was scream like the images of Greek hired mourners, my hair in clumps and skin smudged. Ironically, when I returned from the funeral, my Honors 106 course was reading *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan's series of interlocking vignettes around female intergenerational trauma. Through talking through the lives of those women, through the structure of my peer's thoughts, the course became a pivot into inhabiting my grief, of being seen. Through the subsequent months, that grief calcified, knowledge growing around it. Through this experience, the core of my struggle was resistance to change. I began to strive again, participating in a society rendered moot by death.

Thus, my fascination with the Kerameikos, with a culture of public reconciliation and preparedness for death, centered around the centuries of communal cohabitation with mortality. To live with instead of banishing death, created opportunities for catharsis.

Much like any universal human struggle, the method of defining exactly what a good life *is* has been much argued, debated, and disagreed over throughout history. If you ask an ancient Athenian man what the apex of achievement is, he might reply with “Arete” – a word best translated in English as “excellence” or “virtue”. An Egyptian peasant might respond by saying that following Ma’at – the guidelines set down by the goddess of justice, morality, and balance – was the pinnacle of earthly strivings. An ancient Roman, meanwhile, might assert that the best thing one mortal may achieve is glory. Glory on the battlefield, for the empire, or in bureaucracy, for the empire, would be the heights of achievement. Glory, ultimately, means immortality. A good life, therefore, can manifest as an escape from one’s own mortality. This, in a way, is a liberation.

After all, glory is active – and inaction the byproduct of fear. To be in society and to be *with* community is a transformative act of reconciliation. The urge to control and banish death creates a procrastination of living well.

As Montaigne said: “I want death to find me planting my cabbages, but careless of death, and still more of my unfinished garden.”

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