

To what extent do 'revenant burials' indicate a fear of the dead returning?

A revenant is defined as someone who has returned from the dead¹, it also implies usually that the person is not the same. Most revenants are presented in movies as monsters such as zombies or vampires. However, it is well documented that during ancient times a fear of the dead returning was present. Not only through ancient texts but through looking at ancient burial sites a fear of the dead returning from beyond was existing. For any type of burial during the ancient period the way they responded to a death is shown from 'archaeological and literary sources'². However, literature sources are few in discussing revenants as many of the texts have been lost as time progressed. Therefore, the main source for seeing a different version of burials is mainly done through the archaeological discoveries. This is for, the way a body was buried gives a clear indicator to the distress they may have felt over this death whether through grief or a genuine fear of a person's return. However, without literature sources from the ancient Greeks it is difficult to obtain the amount of fear surrounding the dead with the revenant burials alone.

The Ancient Greeks followed a strict belief when it came to the burial of another, as it would affect the person's eternal rest, for example burying a person with coins, so they could pay Charon the ferryman to take them across the river Styx. If the burial was incorrect it could affect whether the deceased would become a revenant. It is presumed the logic for such a belief is that those who are neglected in death will reappear to bring harm to the living³. As soon as a death occurs the living would have to decide how to deal with the mortal remains⁴. The rituals used for the burial are equally important as 'For the survivors, rituals provide closure, reinforce social stratification, strengthen the collective solidarity of the community, and keep the dead, who are potentially harmful, propitiated'⁵. Which was why it was so important to find the deceased body and give it a proper burial through either placing it into a grave or by cremation⁶. Though Homer proposes through his writings that it was believed the act of cremation allowed the soul to hasten its journey to the underworld⁷, this suggests that it could have been a preferred way of burial in some regards, not only preventing the dead from returning to their body but also hastening the souls' arrival to the underworld so it is less likely to return. It is due to these strict burial practices though that when a body is found with irregularities compared to others that indicates to a strong emotion as well as belief in the possibility of the return of the dead.

¹ Stevenson, 2010. 1520

² Bourbou, C., 2016. 18

³ Bourbou, C., 2016., 214

⁴ Bourbou, C., 2016. 19

⁵ Bourbou, C., 2016.; 19

⁶ Bourbou, C., 2016. 19

⁷ Iliad 23.71– 76,

There has been a constant fear revolving around the idea of revenants, for the Greeks one such fear resolved around the idea 'that they leave their graves at night for the explicit purpose of harming the living'⁸. There are many reasons for a Revenant to return though usually it is thought that those who suffer or perform 'Suicides, mothers who died in childbirth, and victims of murder, drowning, stroke, plague and curses'⁹ are more likely to become revenants, and these burials are handled in a very different way to those who are believed by living standards to have died "normally". The reason they changed the usual ritual performed around the burial for those believed to possibly return was to attempt the prevention of the revenant from escaping the grave and causing harm to the living. To do this there were two ways to deal with the body in question. The first was to sufficiently "kill", this usually meant to completely render the body useless or even non-existent for the revenant. This is 'usually achieved by incineration or dismemberment'¹⁰ however it is unlikely the Ancient Greeks would have used this version as it did not follow their usual rituals and it also may have risked angering the spirit resulting in its consequential return as a ghost instead. Therefore, it is likely the second way was more prominently used which was to trap the revenant in their graves. The revenant could be trapped in a numerous amount of ways;

1. Tied down
2. Staked
3. Flipped onto their stomachs
4. Buried exceptionally deeper
5. Covering the face
6. Pinned down by either rocks or other heavy objects¹¹.

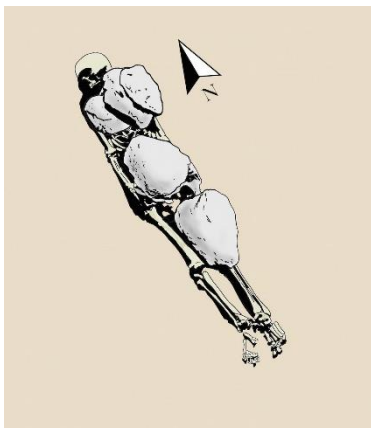


Figure one: A reproduction of a sketch by Sicilian archaeologist Giovanni Di Stefano of one of the unusual burials. Laura Geggel, 2015. Ancient Greek Burials Reveal Fear of the Dead. Live Science

Examples of these diverse ways can be seen in figures one or two. Each way was believed to have been an effective answer to keeping the revenants sealed in their graves. By covering the face such as in figure 2 or facing them the wrong way around it was believed the revenant would become confused and therefore attempt to dig their way out the wrong way and by pinning or tying them down it was hoped they would be unable to move a more frequent practice as can be seen through both figures. By going to such extreme measures by diverting from the usual type of burial ritual as well as even pinning down the bodies shows an intentional fear towards the idea of a person returning from the dead. According to scholar Z.L. Devlin 'the adoption of

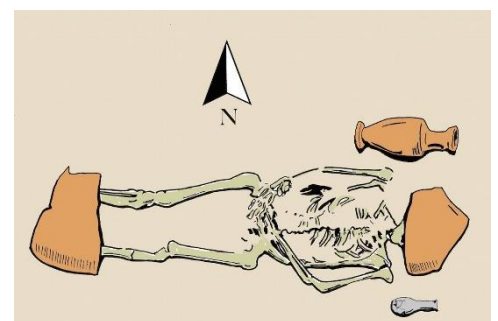


Figure 2: A drawing of the peculiar burial that had five large stones placed over the body of a child. Laura Geggel, 2015. Ancient Greek Burials Reveal Fear of the Dead. Live Science

⁸ Bourbou, C., 2016. 213

⁹ Bourbou, C., 2016. 213

¹⁰ Sulosky Weaver, C.L., 2015: 2

¹¹ Bourbou, C., 2016. 213

practices of skeletal manipulation, skeletal selection and mistreatment of the corpse, including mutilation, stoning and binding, might shed light on the attitude of the living towards the dead'¹² this type of viewpoint will help to demonstrate whether a real fear of the dead returning was present.

Even in Ancient Literature there are clear warnings about leaving a dead body unburied especially one of a person that was more likely to return as 'Sometimes the revenant returns to inflict punishment; this is particular true if the person was murdered'¹³. For example, both Pausanias¹⁴ and Strabo¹⁵ tell the story of the Hero of Temesa. In the story one of Odysseus' sailors got drunk and raped an island girl, in response he was killed. Instead of burying the body Odysseus left and as such the sailor could not rest in peace. The now newly revenant ended up killing the islanders one by one. This tale not only warns readers the consequence of leaving a dead body unburied but also demonstrates to modern scholars a clear fear surrounding the dead and the suffering they could cause towards those living if a body (specifically a body that has been killed), is left alone and in this perhaps even not pinned down when buried. Writings such as this 'gives us a glimpse into the minds and beliefs of the ancient Greeks, and it is clear that many members of the society thought that the dead could roam the earth'¹⁶ due to this it helps us to analyse the skeletons of ancient bodies better such as the revenant burials giving us an idea to the type of fear that could have been present when they sometimes pinned them down with rocks or other such tools.

Examples of bodies being buried in specific ways have been constantly found throughout history. However, bodies that have indications to the listed ways to stop a revenant have also been discovered, the earliest examples coming from Cyprus. The first example of a revenant burial is from a site in Attica, where two dismembered individual were found. One of the bodies belonged to a woman who had been cut in half possibly indicating to the early idea of rendering a revenant's body useless. The skeleton of both this woman and the other person had been deliberately sealed in the grave by large rocks¹⁷. The placement of these rocks could be an indicator to the fear of the dead returning. It is uncertain whether the woman had been cut in half before or after she had died it cannot be obtained the reason for her death. If it was by a gruesome blow the fear of a revenant returning was most likely prominent leading to the rocks being placed upon the grave. However, even then according to Danforth 'the bodies of suspected revenants were hacked to pieces or burned'¹⁸. As such it is uncertain the amount of fear that could have been revolved around this body. If the woman had been cut in half whilst alive it only demonstrates to a brutal death with a slight fear of a possible return from the dead, however if the woman had been cut in half after death by the living it shows a clear underlining fear towards the undead. This example is one of a few that have been discovered. In a Turkish cemetery in an isolated tomb a body was

¹² Devlin, Z.L. Graham, E.J., 2015;

¹³ Garry, 2005; 181

¹⁴ Pausanias 6.6.7

¹⁵ Neel, J. ed., 2017; 191

¹⁶ Sulosky Weaver, C.L., 2015: 1

¹⁷ Tsaliki 2008; 10– 11

¹⁸ Danforth. 1982; 53

found, pinned at the neck, pelvis and feet with nails¹⁹. Unlike the previous example the idea of this being done out of a severe fear of a revenant returning is more likely as the positioning of the nails indicates a clear attempt to keep the body in place and unable to move. The likelihood of this being a normal burial practice is low and as not many others have been found in similar conditions and it is equally unlikely the nails were placed when still alive as there was no indication for that to be true. As such it is a reasonable conclusion that there was a severe fear of the man becoming a revenant. One last example is a burial in Lesbos found in a grave with 15m spikes with his bones. Although it is uncertain where they were originally placed it is certain they were used to pin the body down as its presumed they had been driven into the corpse.

The above examples are believed to be revenant graves by researches for the most part as well as the graves discovered in Kamarina, Sicily which had also like the other bodies had been pinned down in their graves. However, unlike the other examples the bodies found in Sicily were discovered in a mass area of graves. Tombs 653 and 693 as referred to by Bourbou were the only ones who had been inflicted with such treatment as to be bound and as such it 'suggests that necrophobic beliefs and practices were present'²⁰ and therefore it can be believed with strong conviction at least in these cases that a fear was extremely present for why only perform such actions upon these graves and not on others. All the examples discussed though 'illustrates the relationships between the incomplete separation of the soul from the body and the incomplete separation of the dead from the living'²¹ or at least the belief that this is true. Whether the reasons for these burials were due to the fear of the dead returning though is difficult to say.

The fear of revenants is a 'concept that has been present in Greek culture from the Neolithic period to the present'²², however with little evidence it is difficult to obtain to what extent the burials themselves indicate fear of the dead returning. The dead has always been present in day to day life including in Ancient Greece. However, to measure the extent of this fear cannot be done by only looking at the revenant burials. Without the literature sources as stated above that give clear indication to the Ancient Greeks beliefs and rituals regarding death, little would be known about their fear revolving around the undead. With more questions being present then answers it is difficult to say whether these burials were due to the fear of revenants return or not. As such it is only to a certain extent it can be said with certainty through the analysis of Ancient texts and what is known about the burial traditions of the Ancients how much fear was present regarding the undead. Without the ancient texts and only the burials the extent of knowledge and indication of fear from the populace only lessens.

¹⁹ Bourbou, C., 2016. 216

²⁰ Bourbou, C., 2016. 216

²¹ Danforth, 1982; 53

²² Sulosky Weaver, C.L., 2015: 2

Bibliography

Ancient Sources

Jones, W.H.S., Ormerod, H.A. and Wycherley, R.E., 1926. *Pausanias Description of Greece*. W. Heinemann.

Lattimore, R., trans. 2011. *The Iliad of Homer*, reprint. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Primary Sources

Bourbou, C., 2016. *The Bioarchaeology of Classical Kamarina: Life and Death in Greek Sicily*.

Danforth, L.M., 1982. *The death rituals of rural Greece*. Princeton University Press.

Devlin, Z.L. and Graham, E.J. eds., 2015. *Death embodied: Archaeological approaches to the treatment of the corpse* (Vol. 9). Oxbow Books.

Garry, J. and El-Shamy, H., 2005. *Archetypes and motifs in folklore and literature*. ME Sharpe.

Laura Geggel, 2015. *Ancient Greek Burials Reveal Fear of the Dead*. Live Science

Neel, J. ed., 2017. *Early Rome: Myth and Society*. John Wiley & Sons.

Stevenson, A. ed., 2010. *Oxford dictionary of English*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Sulosky Weaver, C.L., 2015. *Walking Dead and Vengeful Spirits*. *Walking Dead and Vengeful Spirits*, 19.

Tarlow, S. and Stutz, L.N. eds., 2013. *The Oxford handbook of the archaeology of death and burial*. OUP Oxford.

Tsaliki, A. 2008. "Unusual Burials and Necrophobia: An Insight in the Burial Archaeology of Fear." In *Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*, ed. E. M. Murphy, 1– 16. Oxford: Oxbow Books

