When the Dead Ensure the Food. 
Death and the Regeneration of Life Through Festivals, Food and Social Gathering during the Ritual Year in Modern and Ancient Greece.

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ABSTRACT. Food is very important both in modern and ancient Greek religion, because the religious rituals are principally performed to ensure the food. Since the dead control the fertility, the death-cult is also a central feature in all religious festivals. In modern times the festivals are dedicated to saints, the holy dead. In the ancient world, the heroes and heroines were important as well as the vegetation deities who perpetually oscillated between life and death. But the ordinary dead are and were also dedicated rituals and offerings at their tombs.

It is important to be on good terms with the dead, because they influence both the living and the stronger powers that control the fruits of the earth. The earth also must be regenerated annually. As the ancient vegetation Goddesses/Gods and heroes/heroines, the saints become mediators on behalf of the living. The dead person was the wielder of a magical influence. He is also a mediator between even stronger powers in the underworld, who are responsible for the fruits of the earth. It is of great importance to manipulate these powers for the benefit of the living world. Before critical passages of the agricultural year, people pray to the dead for their help, and by way of their dead the farmers may communicate their wishes for a good supply at the next harvest.

The article will compare the annual rituals dedicated to the dead to ensure the food in ancient and modern Greece.¹

KEYWORDS: Greece, death-cult, death-rituals, ritual communication, gift, food

¹Cosmos 28 (2012), 309-346
When we examine the various modern festivals, we encounter close parallels with ancient festivals. The modern liturgical year follows the seasonal rituals of the agricultural calendar. This is a legacy from the pre-Christian cult, since prehistoric agricultural rituals also permeated the official Athenian calendar in the ancient world. The modern farmer performs the same ceremonies at the same time of the year as his ancient equivalent: before the sowing he prays to ensure a good crop and at the harvest he offers a thank offering by celebrating a festival. In that way the ancient farmer secured the future relations with his Gods and Goddesses, as the modern farmer does with the Christian saints and other deceased. The central act of the festival is the blood sacrifice or a bloodless offering, for example corn cakes, the gift to the Gods or the dead (Fig. 1), to assure that they will be generous and return the gift in the future. In other words, the dead receive the offering in order to provide for the fertility of society through communication with stronger powers, first and foremost Mother Earth.

Religious rituals in which food is a crucial factor are still important. These rituals are not only an excuse to celebrate and have a pleasant time, but are celebrations to secure the future harvest, or as the Greeks say, “it is for the good” (gia to kalo). The significance of the food is a prominent feature in religious rituals in modern Greece.

In the following, I will focus on the importance of the food in some of the saints’ feasts that I have visited during my fieldwork. I will also discuss the significance of the food in the ritual offerings dedicated at the tombs of deceased individuals. While exploring the seasonal festivals in modern Greece I will also present their parallels in ancient times in which food was crucial. The festivals will be discussed in the sequence which is established by the agricultural cycle. The festival calendar starts in late summer or early autumn after harvest and the threshing of the grain, and terminates around summer solstice and the grain harvest to ensure a good crop.

Religious festivals reinforce the bonds between members of a community and their supernatural patrons, celebrating the exchange of gifts that seal their relationship: the devotees bestow honours and offerings to their patrons who in their turn are expected to renew the
protection they provide to the community. This means that the festival in general is an important means of communication, an offering or a gift, most often dedicated to a deceased guardian of society, for instance to the *Panagia* (i.e. The All-Holy One, the Virgin Mary).^2^ The cyclical perspective is central in connection with the festivals of the agricultural year, and the official ideological rituals are adapted to the agricultural calendar. Thus, the orthodox liturgical year is established through the *Panagia*’s biography. It begins around autumn, and several important moments in the life of the *Panagia* are celebrated during this period of the year, i.e. before and around sowing and during the germination and growth of the corn crops, when the “female”, wet and fertile period in the agricultural year’s cycle replaces the “male” and dry period, because the woman is looked upon as the productive partner in a relationship in the Mediterranean area (Bourdieu 1980: Ch. 3, in particular see fig. p. 354).

![Fig. 1. The first anniversary memorial for Panagiotis Bidalēs. His photo and a wreath dedicated by his mother are placed on the *kollyba* (a mixture of wheat, nuts and fruit) during the liturgy. Tinos island, August 1994. All photographs are by the author.](image-url)
Generally, August and particularly 1 August is also considered the beginning of a new season in Greece. By the end of the dog days, by the end of August, the transitional period towards the “productive part” of the year is about to begin again when the “female”, wet and fertile period in the agricultural year’s cycle is about to resume. At this time, the grain harvest is secured and followed by the “dead period” of its cycle, and the farmer as well as the resting earth starts anticipating the “first rains”, the early rains of autumn (cf. Hes. *Op. 414-19*), that fall from Heaven, so that the Earth conceives.

In Greece, the transition to the fertile and healing period starts when, according to popular belief, the *Panagia* descends into the underworld, and consequently ensures the future fertility in agreement with the divine underworld. The 15 August celebrates the “Dormition” or “Falling Asleep” (i.e. *Koimēsis*) of the *Panagia*, followed by her burial or the “9th day’s ritual of the *Panagia*” on 23 August, thus, reflecting ordinary death-rituals and the following memorial service. The festival marks a turning point towards autumn, and one might also say that she falls asleep, before she is reborn in September, paralleling the earth that sinks to rest after harvest and is renewed in the autumn, since there is a correspondence between the earth and the *Panagia* (du Boulay 2009: Ch. 2) as shown in her biography and the important phases of the agricultural year, from the sowing to the harvest. During the Dormition-festival on the Aegean island of Tinos, pilgrims arrive to the *Panagia* bringing with them offerings, such as olive oil, bread, wine, or sheep (Fig. 2). People also wish each other a “happy winter” (*kalos cheimōnas*). The Dormition may also be regarded as a festival where the first fruits of the grain is offered, presented as the first loaf of bread made from the harvest. At the island of Imbros, in the northern Aegean, the “*Tauros* (i.e. bull) sacrifice” is performed annually at the Dormition of the *Panagia*. Afterwards the dead receive food-offerings at their tombs. The kinds of food that is offered are season’s fruits such as watermelon and sweets (Psychogiou 2008: see fig.10, p. 245).

The Dormition of the *Panagia* is celebrated at the same time as the ancient Athenians celebrated their Panathenaia, dedicated to the
birthday of their protecting city Goddess Athena, the Goddess of the olive tree. In this festival the central ritual was a procession that carried a peplos (dress) through the city up to Athena at the Akropolis. The procession was followed by a sacrifice, in which particularly ewes and cows were dedicated to the virgin Goddess. When the animal sacrifice had been ritually dedicated to the Goddess, the human participants consumed the meat through a communal meal. This ancient fertility- and healing-festival also initiated the transitional period towards the “female”, wet and fertile period in the agricultural year’s cycle, and it was celebrated in a crucial period for the olive crop (Håland 2007a: Ch. 5-6 and 2007b).

Fig. 2. Pilgrims arrive to the Panagia bringing with them sheep, Tinos island, August 1993.

The ancient Greeks believed that the various agonistic festivals derived from commemorations dedicated to great men or women. We encounter the pattern at the Panathenaia, because death-cults both in the Agora (market place) and on the Akropolis were of major importance in connection with the cult of the Goddess. All the agonistic festivals in ancient Greece had their own hero, because they were traced back to some mythical death and burial, i.e. festival
games originated as funeral games for heroes. The rituals re-enacted the ceremonies conducted at the burials and memorial celebrations for a deceased hero. The same picture emerges when we consider the Pan-Hellenic festivals and lesser local festivals, although the connections are more obscure. A putative tomb was a prerequisite for the festival site, and blood-offerings were made in honour of the heroes at the altar that was of central importance in the cult of the hero, a person who lived long ago and was still honoured. It was believed that this dead person was the wielder of a magical influence. Like the dead heroines (Paus. 9.17,4-6), he was also a mediator between even stronger powers in the underworld, who were responsible for the fruits of the earth. It was important to manipulate these powers for the benefit of the living world. Since this pattern can also be found in the modern religious festivals dedicated to dead persons, such festivals are connected with a cult of the dead, and may be referred to as death-festivals.

THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE PERSONIFIED MEAL

Modern Greeks on the island of Aegina, also worship a personified meal in a ritual which is reminiscent of the cult dedicated to earlier vegetation Goddesses/Gods. When the summer half-year closes, the regular break at noon and late evening meals also come to an end. During the festival dedicated to the Exaltation of the Cross on 14 September, the sunny period’s, and among the farmers, very demanding supplementary evening- or afternoon-meal is literally buried during the ritual, Leidinos or Deilino (i.e. Evening-meal). The women gather and some of them boil Leidinos which is made of grain, grapes, pomegranates, almonds, roasted chickpeas and some parsley. Others make a doll which is dressed and decorated with flowers. This doll, Leidinos, personifies the meal which has now come to an end. Leidinos is laid on a table and is lamented by the women. Their laments also tell about his resurrection next spring: “With the dew in March, with the flowers in April, with the work in May you will return.” When they finish their lament, Leidinos is laid in a flower-decorated coffin. While singing, they carry Leidinos in a procession through the village. Afterwards, he is buried, and when
throwing earth in the grave, everyone says: “Now Deilino (i.e. the meal) stops and the sleep will reign”. From now, they will no longer work from sunrise to sunset, at least not until next spring. After the burial of Leidinos, everybody returns to their houses and eats the Deilino asking Leidinos his forgiveness. Then, the music and dance begins.

The festival parallels ancient festivals such as the Dionysian cult, particularly illustrated in a vase painting (ARV 1249, 13) on which the God is lying in a winnowing basket (i.e. liknon). The ritual reminds us especially of the ancient Adōnia although this festival was celebrated earlier in the year. The unofficial Athenian festival dedicated to Adonis, the Adōnia, was a women’s festival and the essential ritual was to make a wooden image of the oriental vegetation God, which was laid on a flower decorated bier on the rooftops. Then, they sang laments and danced, while beating and scarifying their breasts. Next, they buried the dead God. In ancient Athens, women celebrated Adonis during the ripening and reaping of the fruits of the earth, paralleling the celebrations of the Corn Goddesses, Demeter and Kore or Persephone. The Leidinos-ritual also parallels the myth about Persephone’s annual descent to the underworld in the autumn and return in the spring.

OFFERINGS OF THE CROP TO ANCIENT GODS, MODERN SAINTS AND THE DEAD

The two most important moments in the agrarian cycle are sowing and spring, both for the modern and ancient farmer. At the festivals which are celebrated after harvest, in September, people take some of their crop to the church, and put it near the entrance to the sanctuary or iconostasis which separates the congregation from the Holy of Holies, to be blessed by the priest. Next, they take the blessed crop home, so the house will be protected towards the time of sowing in October-November. Then a handful of this consecrated crop is mixed with the seed corn, while the rest is buried in the field to ensure an abundant crop next year. This is a parallel to the ancient Thesmophoria festival when the decayed remains of the offerings (piglets and objects made from wheat into representations of snakes
and male shapes) to Demeter were fetched up from underground “rooms”, i.e. caves, the entrances to the womb of the earth, and mixed with the seed corn (cf. Schol. Luc. DMeretr. 2.1, Rabe 1906: 275.23-276.28, discussed in Håland 2007a: Ch. 5).

Around sowing, on 21 November, the Presentation of the Panagia in the Temple is celebrated. Her “entry into the Temple” marks an important point in the period of winter sowing, and the festival celebrates the Panagia as the patroness of the sowing, by offering her polysporia (poly: many, varied; spori: seed) or panspermia (pan: all, spernō: to sow, “all seeds”), a boiled mixture of all kinds of crop and several varieties of corn, i.e. all sorts of the fruits of the earth. The ingredients are the same as in kollyba (a mixture of wheat, nuts and fruit), which is usually offered at harvest to various other saints and to the dead during the memorial services at the tombs as in the ancient world. The mixture consists of boiled stewed wheat mixed with honey or sugar, pomegranate (the symbol for abundance), cinnamon, raisins, minced walnuts (symbolizing the pleasures of life), sesame, parsley, currants, etc. The mixture is decorated with powdered sugar, which in other situations symbolizes the pollen of the bees.

As I have illustrated in an earlier context (Håland 2005: 205), although 21 November is dedicated to the Presentation of the Panagia in the Temple all over Greece, the name of the patroness and her festival is specified according to the region. By that date the good farmer, especially in Northern Greece, must have sown at least half his land. Accordingly, this feast-day is known in some regions as Panagia Mesosporitissa (mesos: middle, half; sporos, spora: seed, sowing). In other regions, the festival is known as Panagia Archisporitissa (“Panagia the sowing begins”) or Panagia Aposporitissa (“Panagia the sowing is over”). The festival is also called Panagia Polysporitissa, because of the “offering” of the fruits of the latest harvest. It is the custom on this day to boil several varieties of corn in a large cauldron.

In 2011 I attended the festival dedicated to the Panagia Mesosporitissa in Eleusis. Inside the archaeological area in Eleusis is the church dedicated to the Panagia, and here the day of the Panagia Mesosporitissa starts on 20 November. When I arrive at the site around 1:30 pm, the church is open. A little later, 2:10 pm, a woman arrives carrying with her two flower wreaths and starts to decorate the
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icon illustrating the Presentation of the Panagia in the temple. She tells me that the ritual will start around 4:20. Two young girls arrive carrying flowers and they are ordered by the elder to start decorating specific icons at the left of the iconostasis and on the iconostasis, particularly the one depicting Anna and Joachim, the Panagia’s parents, and an older icon depicting the Presentation of the Panagia.

I learned about the ritual from my Greek colleague, the folklorist, Elenē Psychogiou, who has included a description of the ritual as it was performed in 2004 in her book from 2008. Since the early 1980s, when I took some pictures of this church situated right above the cave dedicated to the ancient God Hades, I had been wondering to whom the little church was dedicated; I learned that when reading Elenē Psychogiou’s book. On a later occasion, she told me that the church and the whole archaeological site would be open until vespers and the artoklasia (Orthodox ceremony of blessing bread) has finished, i.e. around 6:00 pm. She also told “that there is not, as you know, a certain programme for the ritual. It is connected with the vespers in the Panagia’s little church and it is not exactly the same every year, because it is not a kind of ‘performance’ but a live religious ritual”. In 2004, when she attended the ritual, she was there a little before 4:00 pm and the women offering the holy breads started to come about that time; “So if you will be there at this time, you can get into the archaeological area with the women and other people that go to the little church for the vespers.”

Arriving by bus from Athens, I was early, and strolled around in the area, and after the museum closed at 3 pm, I went back to the church. Now the decoration had finished, and the decorated icon was placed outside of the church on a stand, and the visiting people had already started to proskynēma, i.e. to perform the set of devotions a believer does in front of an icon. It is especially important to kiss the icon itself. One of the priests had also arrived along with some helpers. A basket with bread, oil, wine and candles was placed outside of the church, next to a column. Inside were other bread offerings and the papers or “letters” (chartia) paraklēseis (prayer or supplication papers), for the health of ill family members, etc. on which were inscribed the names to be read, i.e. blessed by the priest. The arriving participants brought breads4 to offer, particularly the round Holy bread, prosphoro, which always is offered to the church and blessed
by the priest. But, in addition, we also find sweet bread or a kind of cakes sprinkled with icing sugar, which often are baked and offered at annual festivals dedicated to saints. Several women arrived with baskets; most of them filled with a variety of special decorated breads and cakes, olive oil and wine (Fig. 3), and the helpers arrived with various items for the service. Many of the women carried the bread in plastic bags, and started to decorate the baskets with a cloth and candles upon arrival. Others had elaborate cakes and various other sweets, wine and olive oil. The service started around 4:30, and four priests participated. One of them, the leading priest, had been sitting outside of the church earlier, collecting the bread for the service and papers or “letters”. These breads were put into a black garbage sack and along with the letters, were brought behind the iconostasis.

Fig. 3. Women arrive with bread offerings on the eve of the festival dedicated to the Panagia Mesosporitissa, Eleusis, 20 November 2011.
The priests started the service inside the church, and came out with the censer and a candle from which the women started to light their own candles on the decorated breads. After the end of the blessing service (Figs 4a and b) around 5:30 they started to distribute their breads, cakes, etc. to the other participants. The officiating priest had only blessed one of the breads, symbolically, as it would have been unfeasible to bless all the breads and cakes present. Before the end of the liturgy, he tells the assembly that the liturgy tomorrow will start around 8:30 am and there will be another at 9 pm tonight. Outside of the archaeological area, some women serve tea and soup when the liturgy had terminated. Several women said there used to be more bread and cakes; others said there were many people that day since it was a Sunday.

Figs 4a and b. The priest blesses the breads and cakes on the eve of the festival dedicated to the Panagia Mesosporitissa, Eleusis, 20 November 2011.
Also in ancient Greece during Demeter’s festival at the time of sowing, a general mixture of the edible plants to be sown was boiled and offered to the Goddess, and her worshippers also partook of it, while praying for a renewal of the various crops next year. The ritual was repeated around sprouting in January and before the harvest in May-June. The fact that a similar meal is boiled on the festival dedicated to the Presentation of the *Panagia* in the Temple illustrates that the mother of Christ has taken over the functions of an older pre-Christian Mother Goddess, and the ingredients in the mixture draw attention to the ancient Goddess of the corn crop, Demeter, who was particularly worshipped in Eleusis.

**THE OBSCENE REAWAKENING OF THE “DEAD” EARTH**

The female festival dedicated to the midwife, Babo, *Agia* (i.e. Saint) or *Osia* (venerable, blessed saint) Domenika, is celebrated in the
village of Monokklēsia in Greek Macedonia on 8 January. Agia Domenika is the midwife who according to the tradition helped the Panagia at the birth of Christ and until his baptism, but few women in Monokklēsia know of this saint. In this festival we encounter obscenities and alcohol consumption (Fig. 5). This midwinter festival is important to secure the harvest, because January is the time when it becomes clear whether or not the year will be a good one. If the cereals have not grown to a certain height when the frost sets in, they will need a lot of rain in the spring to “catch up” and not be burned by the hot spring sun before they are ripe. If only a small percentage of the seeds have sprouted by January, it is unlikely that the crop will be a good one. The farmer knows that the seeds which germinate after the frost in the spring rains are likely to be blasted by the sun before they are ripe and so will fail to produce grain. At this period, the fields are “dead”. The growth of the shoots is at a temporary standstill. Likewise, the sun’s power has declined each day. This is a kind of magical rite in which people attempt to warm up or wake up the earth to stimulate its fertility by the magical manipulation of sexual or agricultural symbols, by merry feasting and obscene behaviour. It is paralleled in the other modern celebrations and rituals that take place during the twelve-day period from Christmas to Epiphany and during the carnival season before the Lenten period and later during spring, but the ritual also parallels ancient rites.

Fig. 5. Feasting women celebrating the midwife, Babo, Monokklēsia, January 1992.
One ancient parallel is the unabashed nocturnal Haloa, i.e. threshing floor festival of the corn Goddess Demeter celebrated by women in ancient Eleusis (cf. Schol. Luc. *DMeretr.* 7.4, Rabe 1906: 279.24-281.3, discussed in Håland 2007a: Ch. 5). It was also a midwinter festival celebrated at the time of the solstice when the crops are seemingly frozen and arrested in their growth. At this time, the earth needs help “to wake up from the death’s embrace”. The importance of this stage in the grain’s growth explains why the Haloa festival of light, warmth, eating and drinking, ribaldry and fertility magic takes place at this time, and why it is dedicated to Demeter. Both today and in the ancient ritual, the fertility of the earth is stimulated by the magical manipulation of sexual or agricultural symbols. These rituals are not only performed as a reminder of natural events, but attempt to influence them, both magically and by propitiation of the deities concerned. During the Haloa festival a pregnant cow was also sacrificed to the earth in the fields; the growing seed and embryonic life are seen to be related, and according to the paradoxical logic of sacrifice one has to kill the one in order to promote the other (Burkert 1985: 265; Brumfield 1981: Ch. 5).

“**KALOGEROS**: THE CARNIVAL-MONK’S OR RAINMAKER’S JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD TO ENSURE THE CROP

Carnival, *Apokreos*, takes place all over Greece, the Balkans and the rest of the Mediterranean every spring. The carnival season lasts three weeks, and is a time of gaiety and merriment before entering the Lenten period, which lasts until Easter. The first week is known as the “*Prophōnē*” (from *prophōnō*, to address, to announce) because carnival is announced; the second week is the “Meat Week” and the last is the “Cheese Week”. Masquerading during carnival is a widespread custom.

During carnival the farmer remains deeply aware that nature is undergoing a slow change. Thus, by means of various symbolic practices inherited from remote antiquity, he seeks to hasten the coming of spring and ensure the fertility of his land. So, in addition to the comic and satirical performances which take place on Cheese Monday in the village squares, we may also find other practices
inspired by a very ancient sense of magic and usually people ring bells to wake up the sleeping earth and keep away evil spirits.

The carnival ritual known as “Kalogeros”, i.e. the monk, is celebrated on Cheese Monday, around the spring equinox, in the villages of Melikē and Agia Elenē in Greek Macedonia. In the ceremony, rituals to promote rain and ensure the sprouting grain are important. Accordingly, during the main ritual of the festival they sow *polyzoria*, a mixture of grains, while invoking the buried grain so that it may come back to life again. The festival also includes unrestrained alcohol consumption, singing of obscene songs, particularly during the ceremony of ploughing and sowing, a mock

Fig. 6. Before the ceremony starts on Cheese-Monday, the Kalogeros is fed ritually in front of the church, Melikē, March 1992.
wedding, phallic symbols and a procession which lasts 5-6 hours. The ceremony ends as it started: the person who is chosen to be the Kalogeros for the year is fed in front of the church dedicated to Agios (i.e. Saint) Athanasios. The ritual meal always consists of three mouthfuls of each of their most important articles of food: blessed bread, cheese and olives (Fig. 6). By giving this to the rainmaker, the villagers give what they wish to receive in abundance the following year. Afterwards, the Kalogeros is carried to the mud. Here, they immerse him three times. To do the ritual properly, he is laid on his back in the narrow trench or furrow, which they have ploughed in the field. It seems difficult to carry out the ritual properly in the mud, but the mud is in fact of the greatest importance. This act symbolises the death and resurrection of the Kalogeros, and is the most important and tragic aspect of the play. When he has been in the underworld fighting with the evil forces, i.e. death, and comes back to life, he is washed with water from the village’s water-tank, “so it will rain during the summer”, a phrase everybody says while completing the ceremony.

During the procession they pay visits to all the houses in the village and are treated to wine, ouzo and food. In all the houses the owner offers some raisins and a sip of alcohol “to ensure the good”. Equally, every housewife is offered a mouthful of wine by one of the visitors, “the little Prince”, before sprinkling the Kalogeros with polysporia, a symbolic mixture of grains from her sieve, as a return gift (Fig. 7). The Kalogeros ritual has many parallels with the ancient Athenian Anthesteria festival which was dedicated to the wine God, Dionysos. The wine drinking during the Kalogeros, for example, parallels the drinking contest during the Anthesteria which was celebrated when the new wine was opened in the spring month Anthesterion. This festival lasted three days, and was dedicated to the new wine, but the festival was also devoted to the ancestors. During this festival the first shoots of blossom were celebrated at the end of February and beginning of March, but the temporary return of the spirits of the dead was also seen as necessary. It was supposed that the spirits of the dead returned to earth when the wine-jars were opened. They came from the shrine of Dionysos in the Marshes, en limnais, and it was opened only once a year to facilitate the arrival of the dead. The third day of the festival was dedicated to the spirits of the dead. During a ritual which was the concern of the individual householder,
the dead were offered a boiled mixture of all kinds of grains along with honey, *panspermia* (“all seeds”). The meal was cooked in *Chytroi* (“Pots”), from which the day took its name. On behalf of the dead, the meal of pottage was offered to the God Hermes who conducted the dead to and from the underworld.

The resurrection of Christ and the ripening and growth of the grain

In the village of Olympos on the island of Karpathos in Southern Greece, the Orthodox Easter season celebrations are commemorated as a healing spring festival which also includes death- and fertility-rituals. Central is the ritual lament performed by the local women on Good Friday in front of the *Epitaphios* (Christ’s funeral), while tearing their loosened hair. Attached to the *Epitaphios* are written letters, i.e. *moirologia*, laments written in memory of the dead. The written laments are accompanied with pictures of the recently deceased, and the women are not lamenting Christ; they are lamenting
their own dead family-members, particularly those who died most recently, and who are represented in the pictures.

During the Easter season in Olympos, the villagers also conduct an important ritual of rain magic, manifested through a rain litany and a procession with their principal icons: Besides the death and Resurrection of Christ, the most important ritual during Easter is performed on the Tuesday after Easter, when the Resurrection of Christ is proclaimed from the cemetery. To honour the dead and celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, on “New” or “White” Tuesday in the “White Week”, the people of Olympos carry icons of saints from the main church to the cemetery for services honouring the dead. The farmers believe that the icons can ward off drought. Thus, in addition to regular religious services at the graves, the priest says prayers for rain. The priest says a prayer over each grave, where the housewives have placed dishes of different food as offerings to the dead, dyed eggs, elaborate cakes, wine, orange-juice, cheese, sweets, fruits, etc. (Fig. 8). After the priest’s blessing, the food is finally passed around and eaten. In this way, they have a meal with the dead. There is an apparent competition between the leading families in the village to offer the most elaborate grave-gifts. Animal-sacrifice also belongs to the ritual. Then they take the icons, which are wrapped in bright cloths, into the fields to pray at the small private chapels to ensure good crops. They carry the icons in procession over the fields in the neighbourhood of the village, and they have a special service at the river, which is almost dry, during which the icon of the Panagia is immersed in the water in front of one of the many chapels. The background to the procession with the icons happened during a time of drought many years ago. Then, the priest prayed to the icons for rain. Afterwards, they have always carried the icons in procession on Tuesday after Easter. The icons preside over everything: prosperity, fertility, plentiful rain, harmony between the members of society and protection against all aggression from outside.

The Greek Orthodox Church, since Byzantine times, has celebrated Easter on the first Sunday after the appearance of the spring full moon. This is a favourable time for fertility and the growth of the crops. As already mentioned, the first week after Easter is known as the “White Week”, another expression is the “Bright Week” (Lamprē, “bright” being another word for Easter). These expressions
have given rise to various beliefs: no work is allowed in the fields during this week for fear of hail, because hail is white. Further, women are not allowed to use a white distaff for their spinning, because the colour white brings hail (Håland 2005: 204). Instead of working, the celebrations during the “White Week” after Easter are important, since the whole crop may be lost if it starts to hail, and it is important to avoid this.

Fig. 8. The priest says a prayer over each grave, where the housewives have placed dishes of different foods, Olympos, Karpathos island, April 1992.
The Easter celebration offers parallels to ancient festivals dedicated to the vegetation Goddesses/Gods, such as the annual return of Persephone and Dionysos. The latter was celebrated during the aforementioned great spring festival the Anthesteria in Athens to guard the yearly renewal of vegetation while Persephone was celebrated with three different rituals in the same spring month Anthesterion when the flowers were blooming, for example the Chloaia (from an epithet of Demeter, chloē, i.e. young, green, cf. Paus. 1.22,3; Ath. 14.618e), illustrating the importance of the spring and her yearly return (HHD. 399-402, cf. Diod. 5.4,6; ARV 1012,1). The ancient vegetation God, Adonis was also celebrated in spring, before harvest, and today we find a parallel to the Adonis cult in modern Serres (Northern Greece) in connection with the hassili (the “gardens of Adonis”) which is believed to become holy during the Easter procession. Along with the flowers and candles decorating the Epitaphios they are believed to have miraculous power and produce the same fertilising effect as the “gardens of Adonis” on the spring feast of Adonis in antiquity. So, burying the hassili in the fields “is good for the crops”.

THE FESTIVAL WITH BLOOD SACRIFICE AND ECSTATIC DANCE

Today blood-offerings are made to the earth via the dead saints, Agios Kōnstantinos and Agia Elenē, just before the grain harvest. The Anastenaria festival is celebrated 21-23 May in several villages in Greek Macedonia. I have visited the festival in the village of Agia Elenē. The festival is dedicated to the deceased saints, Agios Kōnstantinos and his mother, Agia Elenē. The Anastenaria festival presents animal sacrifice, holy water, and a communal meal when the participants consume the black, fertile, male sacrificial lamb. The lamb is sacrificed by a freshly dug hole close to a tree and the agiasma (“holy water”) at the edge of the village (Fig. 9). The throat of the lamb is cut, so that the blood will flow into the hole, so the earth and the tree get their share. The festival also presents ecstatic and healing dance over red-hot coals by the Anastenarides and the Anastenarissas (i.e. those who celebrate the Anastenaria) who are possessed by their saint; they are in a state of trance. Thus, the festival
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presents rituals, which in many ways are in opposition to the official ideology represented by the Orthodox religion, and at times the Church has persecuted it.

Fig. 9. The lamb sacrifice during the Anastenaria festival, while people are dancing, Agia Elenē, May 1992.

In addition to the animal sacrifice, other food rituals belong to the festival, as when the Anastenarides tour the village during the festival, visiting all the houses bringing with them the healing icons depicting their saints and other holy symbols. The Anastenarides purifies the houses in the following way: following their leader Tasos, with his two large sēmadia (large red kerchiefs which generally are draped over the icons), hanging from around his neck, thus symbolizing his status as Archianastenaris, they enter the room where the family icons are kept. Here, the members of the family greet the procession of Anastenarides, treating them with what they might have to offer the visitors, nuts and raisins being an obligatory gift in all the houses. The offerings of coins, raisins and chickpeas, fruit or other sweets are met with wishes of “Chronia Polla” (i.e. Many Years) – that the Saints help them in whatever way they desire. In this way the houses are
blessed and purified for the next year. The “treasurer” for the day collects the money, which will be counted and redistributed along with the raisins, chickpeas and other edible gifts to those present in the konaki (the shrine of the Anastenarides) at the conclusion of the festival (Fig. 10). Perhaps this is the most apparent illustration of the meaning of the communal meal in the Orthodox cult: when everyone eats with the same fork and drinks from the same bottle, paralleling the Eucharist in the church.

Several scholars, particularly Katerina J. Kakouri (1965) have argued that the Anastenaria has Dionysian origins. This is particularly due to the ecstatic dance we encounter in connection with the ancient Dionysian festivals, performed by the maenads the ecstatic women who participated in his cult and were seized by their frenzied God. According to descriptions of the maenads, they tore to pieces a sacrificial bull, which they afterwards devoured entirely raw. In this way they united with Dionysos, as the modern Anastenarides are seized with their saint during the dance and a sacred meal. So, today the saint seizes the participants as his ancient counterpart, Dionysos, seized his maenads during the Lenaia and other Dionysian festivals, and they begin to dance, and pray: “Agios Konstantinos, have pity on
us, make it rain.” Through the communication with the holy figures in both festivals the crop is ensured as well as the fecundity of the cattle for the coming year.

THE BULL SACRIFICE TO AGIOS CHARALAMPOS, PROTECTOR OF THE FARMERS

Fig. 11. The local priest blesses the bull in front of the saint’s chapel on the summit of Tauros, i.e. the mountain of the Bull, island of Mytlini/Lesbos (hereafter Mytlini, June 1992.

In the farming districts of mainland Greece and at the northern Greek islands, a festival dedicated to Agios Charalampos, the protector of the farmers, is celebrated annually in the mating season of the horses. This saint, martyred in 235 CE, is particularly known for protecting bulls but he is also known for protecting the fecundity of horses and offering immunity from the plague. Since he is expected to ensure a plentiful harvest, he is also celebrated later in the year with a popular festival; a bull-sacrifice constitutes the climax of the festival. According to the popular belief the sacrificial bull also incarnates the saint. This popular festival of Ag. Charalampous is celebrated around
summer solstice and the harvest in the male period (Bourdieu 1980: Ch. 3, in particular see fig. p. 354) and terminates the modern festival cycle which is determined by the agricultural calendar as presented here, and which started with the female fertility-festival dedicated to the Dormition of the Panagia.

On the island of Mytilini the Charalampos-festival is celebrated for four days in June-July, so most emigrants may return home for their summer holidays. With a laurel wreath around its neck and a “placard” commemorating the donor’s father hanging on its flank, the bull is led up to the saint’s chapel on the summit of Tauros, to be blessed by the priest (Fig. 11). Afterwards, the bull is tied to the sacrificial tree. Following is the auctioning of the honorary right to slay the blessed bull; the highest bidder is entrusted with the task of killing the sacrificial animal. He traces a cross with a knife on the throat of the beast. The ox is shot, and the throat is cut immediately so that the blood will flow into the freshly dug hole close to the sacrificial tree and its roots, thus symbolising fertility. Everyone who has bid to kill the ox has thereby “assured their right to be among the first to take the blood”, according to the local villagers. It is important to be drenched by the bull’s gushing blood. By being drenched by the bull’s blood, people are protected against all kinds of sickness the next year. Accordingly, everybody immerses her or his hands into the blood. The male pilgrims daub a cross on their foreheads and palms with the blood, while the women dip their handkerchiefs and pieces of cotton-wool in the blood, and draw crosses on the foreheads of their children. The same happens during other rituals on the island, because people are convinced that the blood has a healing function and wards off evil. The bull is cut up. The meat is mixed with wheat, onions and spices, and left to cook all night long in great cauldrons as the ceremony demands. This traditional dish kesketsi is ready at noon the next day and they call upon the priest to come to the cooking-hut in order to bless the communal meal (Fig. 12), before people get their share.

The holy Charalampos does not only receive the bull, but also kollyba. “Agios Charalampos demands kollyba,” according to the local people. He is not the only one: as soon as the liturgy finishes on Sunday morning, the decorated dish with kollyba is, literally, plundered by the eager pilgrims, rushing into the corridor to receive
pieces of blessed bread and a napkin with *kollyba*.

Fig. 12. The priest blesses the *kesketsi* at Tauros, Mytlini, June 1992.

The wine and blood-offerings to the earth during the festival of Ag. Charlampos remind us that although the treating of the living is important during the passages rites, the dead, the earth and the tree also get their share. This is important today, hence paralleling the customs in the ancient world, when a libation was always poured, i.e. dedicated to the Godess(es)/God(s) before one drank one’s fill.

As the Anastenaria, the festival of Charalampos presents a ritual, which several within the official Greek Orthodox Church still consider to be a pagan, sacrilegious survival of pre-Christian idolatrous rites. Particularly the animal sacrifice was a climax in the ancient cult, and many have seen the bull sacrifice at Tauros as a modern example of the ancient pagan bull sacrifices. A possible parallel may be the bull sacrifice, the Buphonia, i.e. the slaying of an ox, a particular ceremony of the Dipolieia festival dedicated to Zeus in his special aspect as God of the city, *Zeus Polieus* (of the City), in
ancient Athens (Paus. 1.24,4 and 28.10). This sacrifice was also performed at the top of a mountain, on the Akropolis, approximately at the same time of the year.

In the Christian period, the official Church has, in every possible way, tried to abolish the rituals which they considered unacceptable to Christianity. The animal sacrifices headed the list of banned rituals. However, the Greek villagers did not stop sacrificing animals to their saints to secure various passage rites. Sometimes a new legend was invented to justify the continued existence of an important ritual, and since the Church did not manage to eradicate the ritual, some priests tried to make the tradition legitimate by attaching the ritual to the Hebrew cult, and we find prayers for sacrificing a bull in Byzantine writings from 8th century CE, since prayers preserved in the Barberini Library in Rome were brought to the council in Florence as an authoritative manual within the Byzantine church by Greek priests who participated in such sacrifices. We also have prayers from the following two centuries. Generally, the upper clergy turned their back to the whole affair, thus letting people do as they wanted, and on Tauros the local priest even blesses the sacrificial animal. One might say that the pagan sacrificial ritual is replaced by a Christian version. The modern ritual, certainly, is influenced by ancient Greek, Christian, Jewish and Islamic culture, and is therefore presented as a legalized Christian custom (cf. Aikaterinidēs 1979: 173-6, cf. 207). In short, both the Anastenaria and Ag. Charlampos festivals are situated within the religious and cosmological context of the Orthodox Church, and they make extensive use of Orthodox symbolism, faith and ritual practice.

The communal meal during the festivals represents a particular close parallel to the ancient sacrificial meal. In the past, the social structure decided how the meat was distributed. Although the contemporary meal is more egalitarian, we encounter parallels in the modern situation: at Tauros, as soon as the priest has finished the blessing of the food, he is the first person to get his plastic boxes filled to the brim with the holy kesketsi. Similarly during the Anastenaria a special table is laid for the dignitaries of the village in a small office inside the main room of the konaki, while Tasos heads the ritual meal which is laid out on the floor in the main room, and the
other participants sit down on the benches that line the walls of the room.

**The Individual Grave Offerings**

The individual death-cult also demonstrates how the deceased provide for the fertility. The standard offering at the tombs is the mixture of the crop, *kollyba*, which is always offered to the dead and distributed to the participants during burials, the following ritual memorial services at the tombs, at the annual memorials for the death and at the annual collective festivals dedicated to the dead, the soul Saturdays, the *psychosabbata* (i.e. *psychosabbato*, *psychē* = soul, *sabbato* = Saturday), i.e. All Souls’ Days (Fig. 13). They are celebrated at the end of winter and at the end of spring, i.e. during the sprouting of the grains, when the flowers and the green grain stalks are proliferating and at harvest.

Fig. 13. Memorial service performed for a deceased person with offerings of food at the tomb on the second of the three *psychosabbata* during Carnival and Lent, Serres, March 1992.
The memorial rituals performed for the deceased are occasions for gift-giving, and after the burial certain memorial rituals must be performed at the tomb, combined with the offering of more material gifts in order to receive return gifts (Håland 2004: 577-80; 2010: 230-5). Every Saturday morning, women wash their relatives’ tombs at the cemetery, before they arrange their food-offerings at the tomb, thus maintaining the social relations with their dead. Today, the official mourning-period generally lasts three years. Memorial rituals are performed on the third, ninth and fortieth day following the burial. The deceased is also honoured every sixth months for three years, the anniversary being particularly important. In general the bones of the deceased are exhumed three years after death and placed in the ossuary (where the bones are placed after the exhumation). After the exhumation, the living are only responsible for celebrating the collective festivals dedicated to the dead. However, the dead are generally celebrated at the anniversary of their death, also after the exhumation and the second burial.

Nine days before the first anniversary memorial of the deceased Panagiotis Bidalēs, his father attached the announcement on the streetlamps in the village of Tinos, the main township on Tinos island. The ceremony starts with a liturgy in the church dedicated to the patron saint of the family. Afterwards they distribute sirtari (kollyba), on top of which a photo of the deceased has been placed during the liturgy (cf. Fig. 1). The visitors are treated with cakes, coffee and metaxa (i.e. Greek brandy). The photo is generally found at his grave, and is returned there after the ceremony.

The relations between the popular death-cult which is carried out within the domestic sphere and the official festivals, is clearly illustrated by the aforementioned “9th day’s ritual of the Panagia” on 23 August which is celebrated annually nine days after the Virgin’s death or “Dormition” on 15 August.

The souls of the dead are thought to be set free during the first week of carnival. They wander among the living until they must go back to their dwellings on Assumption Day or during Pentecost. This means that they are thought to wander among the living from the sprouting of the grains until harvest time. During the ancient Anthesteria festival, the dead were also thought to visit their former homes and roam among the living for three days around the time of
spring germination, as we have already seen. Today the two final Saturdays during Carnival and the first Saturday in Lent are called *psychosabbata* or “Soul-Saturdays”. All Souls’ Days are also celebrated on the Saturday of Pentecost (Rousalia) and on the Saturday after Pentecost. A long procession of black-clad women moves towards the cemetery with dishes of food, particularly *kollyba*. The dishes are placed on the graves as an offering to the dead (cf. Fig. 13). The relatives light candles and burn incense over the family tomb. The priest blesses the food. Afterwards, it is passed around and eaten, so that the souls of the dead may be forgiven. Some of the food is left on the graves as offerings. As already mentioned *kollyba* is the equivalent to the *panspermia* of the ancients offered at sowing, sprouting and harvest to assure the future crop. In modern times, some people assume that the souls of the dead are set free by sacrificing hens’ blood on the graves. At the ancient animal sacrifices, the victim was also killed so that the blood would flow into the earth and appease the souls of the dead. But it is also a sacrifice to the underworld accompanied with a prayer for a bountiful harvest, and might be compared with the way Odysseus by a similar sacrifice came into contact with the seer Teiresias in the underworld, Hades (*Od. 11*). According to Homer, a person became a clairvoyant in the moment of death, and by being nourished with blood from the earthly world the dead could answer the questions of the living (*Od. 11*). Today, the bloody death of the sacrificial animal next to the tree, ensures the continuity of the vegetable life, such as in the villages of Agia Elenē and Agia Paraskeuē (cf. supra).

The ancient dead were buried along with gifts and offerings, for example libations and blood sacrifices corresponding to those dedicated to other chthonic deities. A new tomb was sprinkled with grain. The deceased duly provided for, is, correspondingly, often imagined at a banquet, as the large group of so-called *Totenmahl* bas-reliefs show. After the funeral, the funerary sacrifices and funerary banquet are recapitulated at increasing intervals: on the third day and on the ninth day, food is brought again to the grave. On the thirtieth day a communal feast is held to mark the end of the official mourning period. As today, the anniversary ritual was celebrated and there were other less formal visits to the tomb. To care for the graves is a duty which falls on the descendants, as is illustrated on funerary white-
ground lēkythoi deposited in or on the grave (Fig. 14, cf. Håland 2010: 236).

After the thirtieth day ritual, the official honouring of the deceased is incorporated into the general celebrations with which the city honours its dead every year: days of the dead, Nekysia, or days of the forefathers, Genesia. Nemesia was probably an all-night festival dedicated to the dead. Another feast lasted nine days. Ceremonies dedicated to the dead were also celebrated within the domestic, familial sphere, paralleling the contemporary psychosabbata when the public rituals have finished. During these ceremonies, people had meals at the tombs and the relatives invoked the deceased by name (mneia), thus paralleling the modern letters, or moirologia, laments written in memory of the dead in Olympos. They also distributed food to the other participants.

Fig. 14. A black-clad woman with offering at a decorated tomb, funerary white-ground lēkythoi, National Museum, Athens 1991.

On such days the graves are adorned (ARV 746,4, 748,1), offerings
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are made, special food is eaten, and it is said that the dead come up and go about in the city. The offerings for the dead are pourings, choai: barley broth, milk, honey, frequently wine, and especially oil, as well as blood of sacrificed animals; there are also simple libations of water, which is why there is talk of the bath of the dead. According to Isaeus (6.51), there is also enagizein, the consecration and burning of foods and sacrificial victims; but the living, too, have their feast, as in contemporary society. Indeed, it is through the “meals of mortals ordained by custom”, the “enjoyable, fat-steaming, burnt offerings of the earth”, that the deceased receives her or his honour. An epigram from the Hellenistic period tells about the dead Cleitagoras: being in the world of Mother Earth and Persephone, he asks for flowers, milk and the playing of pipes. In return he will also give gifts (AP. 7.657).

On the second day of the Anthesteria (12 Anthesterion), around 1 March, it was supposed that the spirits of the dead returned to earth and roamed around the living (Schol. Ar. Ach. 1076). Then the dead were honoured with an offering of panspermia (cf. kollyba), and libations as prescribed by customs, and afterwards they were driven out. Nekysia and the Anthesteria, the ancient flower and death-festivals may be compared with the modern Rousalia, but with the Carnivals as well – particularly the Kalogeros-festival and the Soul-Saturdays – celebrated at the same time of the year as the Anthesteria, i.e. around the time of spring germination as already mentioned. Initially the Genesia was a festival celebrated within the domestic sphere at the anniversary of the deceased, but it was later transformed from a clan festival into a common public citizen festival (cf. Plut. Sol. 12B, 21.4 f.) celebrated before sowing in autumn, just before the Mysteries at Eleusis.

All the grave offerings which take place during the festivals demonstrate that there is a strong link between the official rituals and the domestic rituals people perform for their own dead, since the fertility-cult is enduringly tied to death. This is further illustrated by the blood sacrifice dedicated to the deceased, and the other offerings consisting of what one desires to obtain in return, for example, the various agricultural products that constitute the kollyba. Also the ancients believed that human being should return to the Goddesses and Gods a part of what they gave to her or him. The ancestors, who were and are mediators between humans and the more powerful
deities, get periodic offerings of *kollyba* as the dead in Ancient Greece got appropriate offerings of food (cf. Fig. 14; *ARV* 1227,1; Aesch. *Cho*. 22 ff.).

The renewal of fertility depends on a successful communication with the saints and the other dead, depending on people gathering to celebrate the renewal of agricultural life by having a feast. Thus follows the significance of a successful communication with the deceased and the divine forces to which the festivals are dedicated. The dead are assumed to be mediators between the living and the stronger powers in the underworld, who are responsible for sending up a good yield. Thus the dead assist the living. The fertility of the renewable subsistence resources depends upon the collective ritual efforts of everybody. The fertility of the earth depends upon that people gather to celebrate the renewal of fertility. This is manifested by a communal meal, but to greet visitors is also important. To greet somebody by presenting her or him with food is to bless the guest with a wish for the kind of fertility that the actual food refers to. This is related to the relatives worrying that the visitors will not accept the sweets they distribute at the cemetery. If you don’t accept, “something bad will happen”. You will then block the way or passage rite and the natural cycle will be obstructed. The natural cycle depends upon the deceased’s participation but the living must participate as well. The efforts of the living are also necessary so the deceased will arrive at their final destination and be able to carry out their mediating role. During my first visit to the 1st Cemetery in modern Athens, I was told that I should eat the *kollyba*, but put the cake on the tomb. Hence I participated in a meal with the deceased and the living descendants.

**Offerings and Fertility, Some Conclusions**

As the modern saints ensure the future fertility when they descend into the underworld either at the start of the fertile annual cycle or at the preparation of the grain’s ripening and harvest, the ancient vegetation Gods Adonis’ and Dionysos’ and the vegetation Goddess Demeter’s daughter Persephone’s death and rebirth were important to secure future prosperity.

The official rituals are influenced by the domestic rituals people
perform for their own dead, in the same way as the domestic rituals and grave cult reflect the public performances. The cult of the dead presupposes that the deceased are present and active beneath the earth, and are ready to send good things up above. The connection between death and life is not only present in the cult dedicated to the dead mediators, but also the blood sacrifice dedicated to the dead themselves, and other offerings. By giving these gifts to the dead, people give what they wish to receive in abundance the following year. These glimpses from the Greek worlds show how food and religion are linked and also establish the connection between the living and the dead and between the ancient and modern worlds (Fig. 15).

Fig. 15. Pilgrims sharing kesketsi at Tauros, Mytlini, June 1992.
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Notes

1 Since 1983, I have had several periods of fieldwork in the Mediterranean, mainly in Greece and Italy where I have also been conducting research on religious festivals since 1987. The problems and fruitfulness of working with anthropological comparative approaches (such as using material from Modern Greek civilisation as models) to Ancient Society are discussed in Håland (2007a). See particularly chs 4-5, for comprehensive presentations of the following festivals. See also 2005, 2006.

2 The Greek name of the Virgin reminds us that she is considered the most important intercessor and saint in the Greek tradition which emphasizes her maternal role as the Mother of God, rather than her Virginity. There are further theological differences in the way in which Mary is viewed in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. In the Orthodox Church, Mary is not seen as immaculately conceived and bodily assumed into heaven. Accordingly, the Orthodox Church celebrates her Dormition, rather than her Assumption, and she does not become a semi-deified human as in Catholicism (Dubisch 1995: 236; cf. Economides 1986: 19-20).

3 The following description draws on Kyriakidou-Nestoros (1986: 111, 113-6, cf. also Megas 1992: 248-9; Loukatos 1982: 42-3). For a more recent version of the ritual, organized by the educational and cultural
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association of Kypselēs in cooperation with the municipality of Aegina on 9 September, 2007, see:
http://aegina2007.wordpress.com/2007/09/04 (12 June 2012). I would like to thank the anonymous reader of the article for providing me with this link. Here, we get a short description of the programme, which includes revival of the custom staged by members of the aforementioned cultural association combined with traditional Greek dances performed by children. Next, a summary of the custom describes it as an autumnal phallic custom with symbolic characters diffused from the satirical spirit of the ancient Dionysian custom which has been performed until today and which now is revived in Kypselēs, Aegina. Although I have interpreted it as a parallel to the ancient Adonis and similar customs, it is interesting to learn that it is viewed as a phallic Dionysian custom, which is consistent with Greek interpretations of similar customs elsewhere in Greece, such as on the Peloponnese, cf. Psychogiou (2011).

4 In Greek they use the word *psomi* for everyday bread, and *artos*, pl. *artoi* for the special ritual breads.


6 Although the Greek state officially is in the process of instituting cremation of the dead (while the right to hold civil funerals is being required, however), with the prospect of complete secularisation of the funeral service in view, in practical life people still carry out the traditional customs, cf. Håland (2010), and there are still no crematoria in Greece (2012).

References and Abbreviations


Economides, Irene (1986). *Differences between the Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism*. Athens.


