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doi:10.1017/S0017383524000032

INDIVIDUALS FACING DEATH: THE EVIDENCE OF VERSE EPITAPHS*

Verse epitaphs are our main and very abundant source for responses to individual deaths. We can almost never know exactly whose attitudes or values they express, but we can assume that they embody attitudes and values that it was acceptable to express publicly. Many at all dates seek merely to commemorate the dead person or convey grief, but, from about 400 BCE onwards, others adopt a position on the fate of the dead person, though often hedged with a cautious ‘if’. Very many possibilities emerge: they range from a plain denial that anything survives death, via claims that the dead person is now (e.g.) in the *aither*/in the home of the blessed/on Olympus/with the heroes, to, very rarely, declarations that s/he is now actually a god. Strangely enough, support for such claims is never sought in the fact of the dead person being an initiate in a cult that promised advantage in the afterlife. In all this we see not so much individual choices as the range of options available for individuals to believe in. But we must also suspect that belief in the more optimistic options can seldom have been as firm as in a society where such options were authoritatively endorsed and alternatives not publicly countenanced.

Keywords: verse epitaphs, afterlife, Epicureanism, soul, Hades, mysteries

When we think about ancient views of the afterlife, we tend to remember first of all the depictions in great authors – Homer’s underworld, or Virgil’s, or the myths of Plato – but in order to discover attitudes

* This essay was first written for a collective work that did not reach publication on ‘The Individual in Ancient Religion’, whence its title. I am very grateful to *Greece & Rome* for granting it a home here.

found among the largely anonymous mass of the population, funerary epitaphs, above all those, more expansive, in verse, are the main and very abundant source. This is one of the rare areas in the study of antiquity where one does not feel short of evidence. Peek's comprehensive collection of verse epigrams of 1955 contained, including addenda, 2,138 items.¹ Very many have been published since then; those from the eastern Greek world are collected in the five volumes of R. Merkelbach and J. Stauber's *Steinepigramme aus dem griechischen Osten* (henceforth, *Steinepigramme*),² but those from elsewhere are scattered in successive numbers of *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Some are Christian and so not my concern here, but the majority pagan.³ No doubt some relevant items among the total (surely more than 3,000) have eluded me.

One obvious obstacle to steer round is that, though epitaphs relate to individuals, the source of the text is not usually knowable. Where it is, it is not the deceased or a relative of the deceased but a poet. That is obviously true of the sophisticated epitaphs by well-known poets that found their way into the *Palatine Anthology*, but even less skilful compositions will still normally have been the product of someone with a poetic sideline, so not the deceased's relatives. Thonemann has recently studied epitaphs from the large region of eastern Phrygia known as the Axylon and tentatively identified four distinct poets; many other epitaphs he ascribes to an 'Axylon Verse Koine'. All the poets he takes probably to be village schoolmasters, steeped in the language of Homer.⁴ The fifteen-year-old daughter of an imperial freedman who died in Teos received ten lines of epitaph in Latin and eight in Greek, expressing appreciably different attitudes: which actually reflected her parents' feelings?⁵ Themes and phrases and even whole lines recur from epitaph to epitaph. One couplet

¹ W. Peek, *Griechische Vers-Inschriften*, I (Berlin, 1955); henceforth Peek, *GVI*. For this and other epigraphic abbreviations, see the list in *REG* 133 (2020), 652–76, also available at <<https://aiegl.org/grepiabbr.html>>. Where an epitaph is available in several modern collections, I try to refer to all, with commas between; lists of references divided by semi-colons refer to separate epitaphs. I cite R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana, 1942), as Lattimore, *Themes*.

² Munich and Leipzig, 4 vols., 1998–2002. Eighty-one addenda are listed in G. Staab, *Gebrochener Glanz. Klassische Tradition und Alltagswelt im Spiegel neuer und alter Grabepigramme des griechischen Ostens* (Berlin, 2018), 328–45.

³ But for Christian epitaphs in one region, see my *Religion in Roman Phrygia* (Oakland, 2023), 141–3.

⁴ P. Thonemann, 'Poets of the Axylon', *Chiron* 44 (2014), 191–232. Many of these epitaphs are for Christians, but the pattern is likely to have been the same earlier.

⁵ Peek, *GVI* 2006.1, *Steinepigramme* 03/06/04 (1st/2nd century CE).

Not death is painful, since that is fated for all,
but to die before reaching maturity and before one's parents.

appears with slight variation in almost twenty different epitaphs, sometimes as a whole poem, sometimes with more lines to follow, at various places in the east Greek world, and has even recently turned up in Boeotia.⁶

But wholesale repetition on that scale is unusual, and one can imagine a situation in which ready-made epitaphs were much more common than they actually are.⁷ The relatives of the deceased normally had some input, because the circumstances of the deceased's life and death are usually taken into account. It would be easy to accumulate distinctive details that the poet was certainly instructed to include: the man, for instance, who boasts that in life he had the world's finest collection of *kylikes*, cups; two men who claimed to have been murdered, one by his adulterous wife, one by an arsonist slave; the man who was eaten by a bear.⁸ What we do not know is the extent to which relatives did not just contribute certain facts of the deceased's life but also shaped the tone of poem, its religious stance. Let us imagine a poet addressing grieving relatives: 'Right, he was a young man of eighteen, immensely talented and dying with huge promise unfulfilled: what next? Do I say it shows the unfairness of life? Or shall I say that those whom the gods love die young? And shall I send him to the isles of the blessed, or don't you believe in all that?' We cannot attend such conversations, but it is unlikely that relatives would have accepted a complete chasm between what the poet wrote and what they believed or would like the world to believe; we must at all events suppose that what appeared on epitaphs almost always fell within the range of socially acceptable attitudes. Socially acceptable attitudes are not necessarily the same as individual beliefs; there is a

⁶ Peek, *GVI* 1663–9; T. Drew-Bear, 'A Metrical Epitaph from Phrygia', in G. Bowersock et al. (eds), *Arktouros Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Berlin, 1979), 308–16; *SEG* 62, 284; *SEG* 63, 1286, 11–12. Cf. Staab (n. 2), but his main argument is that the case is exceptional.

⁷ For the debate on the existence of 'pattern books', see Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), 17–20; E. Gibson, *The 'Christians for Christians' Inscriptions of Phrygia* (Missoula, MT, 1978), 85–97, esp. 94 ('there was obviously a tombstone workshop here [upper Tembris valley], equipped with a handbook of phrases'); C. C. Tsagalis, *Inscribing Sorrow. Fourth-Century Attic Funerary Epigrams* (Berlin, 2008), 52–61, and Staab (n. 2).

⁸ Peek, *GVI* 98 (from Ath. 11. 465D); Peek, *GVI* 1098, *Steinepigramme* 07/05/04 (Alexandria Troas, 1st/2nd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1120, *Steinepigramme* 02/03/01 (Amyzon, Caria, 2nd century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1122, *IG IX, I*² II 340 (Thyrrheion, Akarnania, 2nd/1st century BCE).

barrier here beyond which we cannot go. What does emerge, and is indeed the central conclusion of this article, is that there was a great range of socially acceptable attitudes to death from which the individual could choose.

Multiple perspectives

The contrast in this regard between antiquity and the world of Christian burial is great and manifest. If one studies the epitaphs in a Christian church or graveyard, one finds there are really only two possibilities: either a confident expectation, or at least a hope, of the afterlife is expressed, or nothing is said on the subject. Those two options exist in Greece too; indeed, saying nothing is much the commonest position, and until the fourth century BC virtually the only one attested. The following short epitaph is characteristic: ‘In this tomb Aristodikos duly buried his dear son Boethos. All his parents’ care has gone for nothing’ (Peek, *GVI* 290).⁹ The survivors pity themselves; there is no hint of anything good in store for the dead. But silence about the afterlife co-exists with the option of speaking of it with an ‘if’:¹⁰ ‘if there is any reward for the pious, then my dear old nurse is in the place of the pious’; or without an ‘if’: ‘now she is with the pious’; or, much more drastically, the option of denying the existence of the afterlife altogether. Greek funerary epitaphs are marked by some other very un-Christian notes even where the reality of an afterlife is not explicitly denied. They are full of lamentation, of stress on the grief and loss of the bereaved, and these themes often tip over into complaint: an unspecified ‘envy’ (*phthonos*), an envious Hades, an envious or ‘stupid’ (*dysxynetos*) spirit/destiny (*daimon*) are often blamed for the death: the valuable index of motifs in *Steinepigramme V* has over thirty entries under *Neid* (envy).¹¹

⁹ ‘Care’ here paraphrases the untranslatable *charis*. For a case where children, by burying their parents, were able to pay back that *charis*, see E. and N. G. Schwertheim, *Epigraphica. Lydien, Mysien, Türkei, der Sammlung Yavuz Tatiş* (Izmir, 2008) no. 103 (*BE* 2019 p. 573, bottom).

¹⁰ For the ‘eschatological if’, cf. R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2005), 364.

¹¹ Cf. Peek, *GVI* 499–505; W. Peek, *Griechische Grabgedichte* (Berlin, 1960), 39–40; a new case *SEG* 65, 187.6 (Athens, 3rd century CE). In *SEG* 65, 1205 (Pontos, imperial), Momos, the spirit of backbiting, is blamed; in *SEG* 62, 1065 (Paphlagonia, 3rd century CE), Nemesis from Hades is against the good; in *SEG* 67, 718 (Hyllarima), Apollo himself envied a doctor’s prowess. *Dysxynetos*: Hansen, *CEG* 557; cf. 586.7. For a good Hellenistic set of complaints, see Peek, *GVI* 1679–83. I. *Cret.* II. III. 44 (Aptera, 3rd century CE?) is a remarkable prose lament: the bereaved husband declares himself a victim of *baskania*, envy, the evil eye, then ‘I cry out and

The object of complaint is usually these entities rather than named gods, but Artemis is once reproached for being busy hunting while Athenais died in childbirth. That epigram admittedly is known from the *Anthologia Palatina*, not from a stone, but it is on a stone that we read that the twenty-year-old Crispus, his parents' sole staff, has been killed by a 'cruel spirit/destiny' (δαίμων βάρυς); the grim conclusion is drawn that 'so the gods care nothing for mortals, but like wild beasts we are swept along in arbitrary life or death'. Elsewhere a drowned man(?) is made to declare that Poseidon himself killed him with his trident. A young doctor supposedly declares that Apollo has killed him from jealousy of his skill, equal to that of Asklepios.¹² There was a Greek saying 'he whom the gods love dies young'. The poet Leopardi reports that his mother, a good Catholic, rejoiced when her children died young and sinless, but it was not usually in that spirit that Greek epitaph-writers quoted the saying, as they often did; the thought was rather that, if you have a really splendid child, someone with all the blessings, you can be sure that he or she will not last long. 'What is this law of the gods, where men and girls die before their time – not the ugly ones, nor those of lowly parents, but any who is of outstanding appearance or birth: this was a noble truth spoken by Delphi to mortals, that golden children go first to Hades.'¹³

Nonetheless, the old saying could on occasion be used as a consolation. A young stonemason Meidias is made to declare 'I have cast off (ἀνέλυσσα) to the gods and am with the immortals; for those whom the gods love all die young'; a son consoles his father with the same thought.¹⁴ Such reversibility is characteristic of all this material. Pairs of contradictory epitaphs are easy to assemble, some indeed deliberately playing off one another. Many epitaphs either address the dead with a χαίρει, which means 'greetings' or 'farewell' or 'fare well', or, if spoken by the dead, urge passers-by to greet the tomb with a

she does not hear...I achieve nothing...' Cf. too 'Men have no control, the Fates revolve everything': *I. Tomis Suppl.* 384.

¹² Peek, *GVI* 1607 (*Anth. Pal.* 6.348, Diodorus XVI in Gow-Page, *GP*); Peek, *GVI* 857 (Neopaphos, Cyprus, 2nd/3rd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1945. 110–11, *Steinepigramme* 16/31/05 (Appia in Phrygia, later 3rd century CE or later); G. Staab, *EpigAnat* 50 (2017), 9–16 (Hyllarima in Caria, 1st century CE).

¹³ Peek, *GVI* 1684 (Chersonnesos, 1st/2nd century CE). Leopardi: I. Origo and J. Heath-Stubbs, *Giacomo Leopardi. Selected Prose and Poetry* (London, 1966), 9–10.

¹⁴ *Steinepigramme* 08/06/09 (Hadrianuthera, 3rd century CE?); Peek, *GVI* 1029.13–16 (Attica, 2nd century CE); cf. Peek, *GVI* 2003 (Gytheion, 1st century CE).

‘χαῖρε’; others, spoken by the dead, tell the passer-by not to bother with such a greeting, since the dead man’s days of ‘faring well’ are over.¹⁵ An extremely common designation for the destination of the fortunate in the underworld is ‘place of the pious’; Persephone can be urged to be friendly to a girl who burnt many thigh bones for her (robustly material understanding of piety!); a painless death can be a reward for piety.¹⁶ But it can also be said that piety cannot avert death, that if piety had been rewarded a woman would not have died childless.¹⁷ These positions are not logically incompatible (piety unrewarded in life might fare better in death), but very different in emphasis.¹⁸ Some dead request offerings or express thanks for them, others spurn them as wasted trouble;¹⁹ some ask the passer-by to ‘pity’ the dead, some point out the futility of tears, some note that despite the survivors’ tears the dead is now in a happy place.²⁰ Individual epigrams, even individual lines within an epigram, can blend what might seem contradictory attitudes: ‘an unwelcome fate took her to the homes of the blessed’; parents weep unconsolably for children now in bliss.²¹

¹⁵ I. Peres, *Griechische Grabinschriften und neutestamentliche Eschatologie* (Tübingen, 2003), 155–61; χαῖρε: C. Sourvinou-Inwood, ‘Reading’ *Greek Death* (Oxford, 1995), 205–7; χαῖρε rejected: e.g. Peek, *GVI* 2006.1, *Steinepigramme* 03/06/04, M. Obryk, *Unsterblichkeitsglaube in den griechischen Versinschriften* (Berlin, 2012), 150 F 2 (Teos, 1st/2nd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1866.6, *IGUR* III 1286 (Rome, 3rd century CE).

¹⁶ Peek, *GVI* 1914.1–2 (Cyprus, 3rd century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1261 (Crete, 2nd century BCE).

¹⁷ Peek, *GVI* 709.7–8 (Cyclades, 1st century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1121.9–10, IG XII, 6 873 (Samos, 1st century BCE/1st century CE). In Peek, *GVI* 241, *Steinepigramme* 17/10/07 (Xanthos in Lycia, 1st/2nd century CE) it is the piety of the parents of dead children that goes unrewarded.

¹⁸ Cf. the brilliant remarks of J. Gould, *Herodotus* (London, 1989), 81–2, on proverbs.

¹⁹ Request/acknowledgement: Peek, *GVI* 985, *Steinepigramme* 06/03/01, with a more cautious text (Stratonikea on the Kaikos, 2nd century CE?); Peek, *GVI* 1156.5–6 (Paros, 1st century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1157.13–14 (Itanos, 1st century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1994, *IGUR* III 1210 (Rome, 2nd century CE); *IGUR* III 1155.40–5 (Rome, 2nd century CE: rather a special case, as Regilla makes a strong claim to heroic status); Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), 126–31. Pointless: Peek, *GVI* 1363 (Astypalaia, 1st century BCE: no food or drink, please, but some saffron or frankincense would be acceptable!); Peek, *GVI* 1012.6, *Steinepigramme* 03/07/19 (Erythrai, 1st century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1906, *IGUR* III 1245, Obryk (n. 15), 148 F 1 (Rome, 3rd century CE), which shares four verses with *Anth. Pal.* 11.8, making the point that libations just muddy the ground; *Steinepigramme* 18/15/13 line 3 (Side, late 3rd century CE).

²⁰ Pity: see the indices to Hansen, *CEG* s.v. οἰκτίρω. Futility: Peek, *GVI* 774.5–6, *Steinepigramme* 01/23/03 (Herakleia under Latmos, 1st/2nd century CE?); Peek, *GVI* 965.6–9 (Thessaly, 3rd century CE?); Peek, *GVI* 969, *Steinepigramme* 04/08/02 (Daldis, 1st century CE). Happy place: Peek, *GVI* 718, *Steinepigramme* 08/05/05, Obryk (n. 15), 45 no. B 4 (Miletupolis, early imperial); Peek, *GVI* 1197.9–10 (Thera, 1st/2nd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1244 (Athens, 2nd/3rd century CE: my name is Flower [Anthos], perhaps I will flower among the dead); Peek, *GVI* 1969.13–14 (Perinthos, 1st/2nd century CE: not an absolute ban: weep less!)

²¹ Peek, *GVI* 1346 (Mytilene, 150–100 BCE); cf. e.g. *I.Egypte métriques* 32, Obryk (n. 15), 65 B 15 (Memphis, Hellenistic); Peek, *GVI* 1139 (Crete, 2nd century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1970, *IGUR* III

That different epigrams or even the same epigram might express radically different attitudes is no new discovery: the point was made again and again in what is still, despite the publication of many new texts, the best book in the field, Richmond Lattimore's *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* of 1942. But the point deserves emphasis. One could say what one pleased about the afterlife without causing offence or encountering trouble. There is a contrast here not just with the Christian centuries, where the church controlled the sentiments expressed in graveyards, but also with speech about the gods in antiquity. One could not exercise complete freedom to say what one liked about the gods in public – different opinions were possible, but the extremer forms of doubt had to be kept for the lecture room.²² About death there were no such inhibitions.

700–300 BCE

I have written thus far as if Greek antiquity was a timeless zone. I will now introduce a chronological dimension, to the limited extent that this is possible. The limitations on this approach are two. First, though we have chronological corpora for the eighth century–c.400 BCE and for the fourth century BCE, nothing of the kind exists for later centuries. The two great corpora are organized respectively by theme (Peek, *GVI*) and by place (*Steinepigramme*). In an *editio minor* Peek did introduce a chronological dimension, but one that divided a millennium into just four very uneven bands, of which the fourth lasted from 30 BCE to the end of antiquity.²³ Second, very few such texts are rigorously datable, and the margin of error in the dating of almost any one is wide. So what follows can only be a broad brush treatment.

Until the fourth century BCE complete silence about eschatology is the norm, if we accept that the simple expression 'go to Hades' means little more than 'die'. The early epitaphs seek merely to glorify the dead persons and to bewail their fate. The one exception is the Athenian epigram on the dead in the fighting at Potidaea in 432,

1148, Obryk (n. 15), 74 B 20 (Rome, 1st/2nd century CE). Parents: e.g. Peek, *GVI* 665 (Macedonia, 1st century BCE).

²² Diog. Laert. 2.117; J. F. Kindstrand, *Bion of Borysthenes* (Uppsala, 1976), 225–6.

²³ W. Peek, *Griechische Grabgedichte* (Berlin, 1960). The other bands were 7th/6th century–500, 490–320, 320–30 BCE. The dates I give in footnotes represent the best guesses, usually based on letter forms, of one of the sources I cite.

which contains an early example of the very common soul–body antithesis: ‘*Aither* has received their souls, earth their bodies’ (Peek, *GVI* 20, *IG* I³ 1179; Hansen, *CEG* 10). Some later epigrams that deploy the antithesis are positive about the fate of soul: it has flown up to Olympus, or gone to the gods.²⁴ How much comfort there might be in the idea of the soul just vanishing into the *aither* is hard to say; one wonders too whether this is a privilege for good souls, or the fate of all. The matter is no clearer in two fourth-century examples, one from the Piraeus, ‘the moist *aither* holds the soul and mighty thoughts of Eurymachus, this tomb his body’ (Peek, *GVI* 1755; Hansen, *CEG* 535), and one from Gonnoi, ‘his soul wanders mingled in the aitherial *kosmos*’ (*SEG* 38, 440). The main emphasis in the Poteidaia epigram anyway lies elsewhere: on the glory rightly earned by the patriotic dead.

Things become a little more expansive in the fourth century.²⁵ (In this and the next paragraph and notes thereto, the first bracketed number refers to Hansen, *CEG*, the second after / to Peek, *GVI*.) References to the dead entering the chamber of Persephone²⁶ – a slightly more plastic expression than just ‘go to Hades’ – start to occur and become quite common. The motif ‘if there is any reward after death for the good/pious/just, then [the dead person in question] will receive it’ emerges, though there continue to be epitaphs praising dead persons’ virtues without suggesting they will do them any good.²⁷ ‘If’ is differently deployed in a couplet which mentions the monument built by the survivors and adds ‘if that brings any delight (*charis*) to one lying in Hades’; that doubt whether the dead perceive anything in the world of the living goes back to Homer.²⁸ For the first time we meet an ‘immortal soul’; but a little incongruously it is said to be ‘held by the universal storekeeper (*tamias*)’, presumably Hades (593/1889). New again are explicit claims in the first or third

²⁴ Obyrk (n. 15), Ch. 1; e.g. Peek, *GVI* 2040, *Steinepigramme* 06/02/32 (Pergamum, 1st/2nd century CE), lines 5–6. For a grouping of epitaphs with the soul–body antithesis, see Peek, *GVI* 1754–77. In later epitaphs *πνεῦμα/πνοή* sometimes replaces soul as the vital element: E. Rohde, *Psyche*, translated by W. B. Hillis (London, 1925), 572 n. 138.

²⁵ I am simply accepting here the judgements of Hansen in *CEG* II as to what is 4th century.

²⁶ Persephone appears in nine funerary epigrams in Hansen, *CEG* II (see the index, p. 340); her only appearance in Hansen, *CEG* I is in a dedication. On her, see at length Tsagalis (n. 7), 86–154; he stresses the addition of Plouton, not Hades, in 571/747.

²⁷ ‘If’: 559/1686, 571/747, 603/1491. No suggestion of reward: 543/1986, 560/492, 600/1688. All these are Attic.

²⁸ *Il.* 24.592–3. On the ‘eschatological if’, see Parker (n. 10), 364–6.

person that the dead man's soul has 'gone to the chamber of the pious' (545/1757) or is 'in Olympos' (558/595) or that he has been 'received by the earth, honoured among the gods of the earth' (595/1689). (Note three different ways of predicting a privileged afterlife!) A fourth text says that one could have imagined the dead woman to be among the goddesses, were it religiously permissible (*themis*) to think such things (575/1697). But the dating of the first two of the three optimistic texts is uncertain, and, though all three are from Attica, in the two cases where the origin of the dead man is known he is non-Athenian; there might be some variation here in local expectations or proprieties.

A different note had been struck in two epitaphs thought, in fact, to date from early in the fourth century. 'I enjoyed much sweet play with my peers. I sprung from the earth, and earth I have become again' declared one Athenian (482/1702).²⁹ This comes close to being the first explicit denial of the survival of the soul, and in another way too sounds like an anticipation of Epicurus: 'play' (*paizo*) in Greek often has an erotic tinge. With it can be paired an unexpected recent discovery from Lycia from the same period. 'Tomb of Apollonios. Here I lie in death, Apollonios son of Hellaphilos. I worked honestly, I enjoyed myself throughout my life, eating and drinking and playing. Go on your way and fare well.'³⁰ 'Eat, drink and play' was supposedly the maxim written 'in Assyrian letters' on the tomb of the mythical Sardanapallos: a Hellenized Lycian dynast here claimed to have followed that advice, though also asserting his moral credentials ('worked honestly').

Hellenistic epitaphs

In the Hellenistic period, claims that something good has happened to the dead person become quite common, though the 'if' formula persists.³¹ A dead woman can even be made, in the first person, to exhort a passer-by to be 'joyful' (*γηθόσυνος*), so great is the reward she has won for her piety.³² The chamber or place of the pious develops into much the commonest ideal residence for the dead throughout the

²⁹ πολλὰ μεθ' ἡλικίας ὁμοήλικος ἡδέα παίσας | ἐκ γαίας βλαστὸν γαῖα πάλιν γέγονα.

³⁰ SEG 48, 1561, *Steinepigramme* 17/19/03.

³¹ E.g. Peek, *GVI* 1474.5–6 (Rheneia, 1st century CE): more in Rohde (n. 24), 577 n. 157; Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), 56.

³² Peek, *GVI* 1990, *I.Egypte métriques* 38, Obryk (n. 15), 61 B 12 (near Apollonopolis, Egypt, 2nd/1st century BCE).

rest of antiquity. Others occur – Olympus, *aither*, the Elysian plain, the isles of the blessed, ‘with the heroes (or gods)’ – but detailed analysis would profit little; no serious attempt is made to distinguish them, they are often muddled together, they all express the same hope.³³ (One could do a riff, looking on beyond the Hellenistic period, on the confused conceptions that sometimes occur: bodies resting in the place of the pious; the place of the pious as gloomy, *ἀλαμπής*; preparing one’s tomb in a beautiful setting on Earth in order to be in a pleasant place in Hades; a young woman taken by Persephone to Hades but rescued by the gods and now flying in the *aither* and enjoying among the gods a fate like a hero...³⁴) Gods – Hermes, Persephone, Zeus himself – probably begin escorting (or being asked to escort) the dead to these privileged places, as often later.³⁵ The theme of memory emerges. In the second century BCE (perhaps) a dead woman claims that even in Hades she will never forget a living relative, and in the first century BCE (again ‘perhaps’) we meet the claim not to have drunk Lethe in order to be able to remember a husband.³⁶ The Lethe theme subsequently develops variations: the dead person claims to have drunk Lethe but not forgotten, or is exhorted not to drink it ‘in relation to me’, or is said to be dining with gods, not having drunk the water of Lethe.³⁷

Two epitaphs hint that it is the piety of survivors in honouring the dead that has secured their relatives a place among the blessed: Kydila (a dead woman) says that ‘though dead, I still love my husband’, because he ‘made me equal in honour to heroes’, ‘glorified me with immortal marks of favour (*charites*)’, and that she lives in the place of the pious; Philiskos (a survivor) claims that he will ‘lead (his faithful slave) to the home of the pious, giving you fair gifts among the living

³³ The abundant references in Rohde (n. 24), 571–2, could now be much extended; cf. A. Le Bris, *La mort et les conceptions de l’au-delà en Grèce ancienne à travers les épigrammes funéraires : étude d’épigrammes d’Asie mineure de l’époque hellénistique et romaine* (Paris, 2001), 72–4; Peres (n. 15), 75–120; Obryk (n. 15), 188–201, 206–7. Much of the material they quote is imperial; the themes change little, though Rohde (n. 24), 541–2, notes an increasing popularity of locations in the sky.

³⁴ Peek, *GVI* 1270.6 (Leontopolis, Egypt, 1st century CE); *I. Beroia* 392.7 (2nd/1st century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 2027, *IGUR* III 1303 f9–10 (Rome, late 1st century CE); *Steinepigramme* 03/02/67, Obryk (n. 15), 35 A 11 (Ephesus, 3rd century CE?).

³⁵ See Rohde (n. 24), 573–4, nn. 144–6.

³⁶ *Steinepigramme* 04/13/01 lines 9–10 (Hermos valley, Lydia); Peek, *GVI* 1874, *Steinepigramme* 01/01/07 line 11 (Knidos).

³⁷ *Steinepigramme* 04/10/07, Obryk (n. 15), 130 E 6 (Hermos valley, 2nd century CE?); *Anth. Pal.* 7.346; *Steinepigramme* 01/20/27 (Miletus, 2nd century CE?); cf. Peres (n. 15), 53–9. Quite often too in epigrams, Lethe becomes a place (cf. LSJ s.v. *λήθη* II).

and among the dead'.³⁸ Virtue signalling and self-praise by survivors is a theme on which one could expatiate: admirers of Barbara Pym may think of Fabian Driver in *Jane and Prudence*, who put a 'large framed photograph of himself' on his dead wife's grave. Another remarkable way to acquire afterlife bliss appears in Itanos: 'We have become holy heroes by public decree' and will receive cult like Minos and his descendants.³⁹

On an honorific public epitaph probably from Smyrna, Lenaios promises to protect a wall of the city 'as best I can', as he did in life. He is suitably tentative, and the claim to actual influence on the world of the living remains rare.⁴⁰ Roman love poets like to play with the idea that a god might swoop down and carry off their girlfriend (e.g. *Ov. Am.* 1.10.7–8): it is funny when they do it, a comic juxtaposition of the worlds of myth and of contemporary dating. But the same idea appears, as if taken seriously, in a certain number of epitaphs, of which perhaps the first, an elaborate text from Pantikapaion, falls in this period: 'I was snatched by Hades, for he loved me, seeing in me a Persephone better than Persephone.' At the end of this text the parents are urged to cease their laments, since their daughter has achieved 'an immortal marriage'.⁴¹ Later it became quite common for young boys to be carried

³⁸ Peek, *GVI* 1128 (Melos, 3rd century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1729, *IG* XII, 4,3, 2947 (Cos, 2nd/1st century BCE). Cf. *Steinepigramme* 09/05/40 (Nikaia, not dated): 'through prayers and rites he has now appeared beside Zeus.' *Steinepigramme* 04/14/01 (Silandos in Lydia, 2nd century CE) credits the survivors with rendering the dead girl immortal (but perhaps only in fame?) by their generosity. For self-praise by a survivor, Peek, *GVI* 647, *IGUR* III 1310, and Obryk (n. 15), 89 C 7 (Rome, 1st/2nd century CE) would take some beating, but no doubt this could be achieved.

³⁹ Peek, *GVI* 1157 (1st century BCE): δόγμασι δημοσίοις γεγενήμεθα ἦροες ἄγνοι. Public burial honours could become 'heroization' or 'immortal honours' in an epitaph (Peek, *GVI* 51, Anaphe, 1st/2nd century CE; Peek, *GVI* 2025, Athens, 2nd century CE); by contrast, the prose accompanying Peek, *GVI* 1197 (Thera, 1st/2nd century CE) speaks of *boule* and *demos* heroizing the dead woman, while the epigram itself credits the husband.

⁴⁰ *Steinepigramme* 05/01/47 (late Hellenistic). *Steinepigramme* 09/06/18 line 11 (Nikomedeia, Hellenistic) states as a fact that the dead warrior is now a protector. Other claims: Peek, *GVI* 2040, *Steinepigramme* 06/02/32 (Pergamum, 1st/2nd century CE): a doctor asks his dead teacher to grant him 'cure for diseases' as before; Peek, *GVI* 1829, *Steinepigramme* 01/20/29 (Miletus, 1st century CE?), the dead boy as star helps competitors in the palaestra; Peek, *GVI* 1282 (Athens 3rd/4th century CE), Asklepiodote is looking down on and protecting her husband; Peek, *GVI* 1979.12–13 (Thessalonike, 2nd/3rd century CE), a dead man tells his brothers to treat their mother well, for every immortal soul flits everywhere and hears everything. In the prose section of Peek, *GVI* 1166 ('Smyrna'; not in *Steinepigramme*, 3rd century CE), a boy who died age four became a 'private hearing god' (θεὸς ἴδιος ἐπήκοος) for his parents. Other prayers to the dead: Peek, *GVI* 805.9 (Nisyros, 2nd century BCE); *Steinepigramme* 05/01/29 (Smyrna, 2nd century BCE).

⁴¹ Peek, *GVI* 1989. Also late Hellenistic (?) are *SEG* 62, 907 (*I. Priene B-M* 405), joining the spring nymphs; Peek, *GVI* 1551, *Steinepigramme* 03/06/07 (Teos): Hades snatched you at a festival of Demeter like Persephone; *Steinepigramme* 02/09/33 (Aphrodisias): Persephone took him, from

off like Ganymede to pour nectar for the gods. Seizure of girls by the nymphs (another motif apparently emerging in the Hellenistic period⁴²) is thought to be a euphemism for drowning. One may wonder whether such whimsies brought much comfort to parents. The same question arises with a couplet first attested in perhaps the third century BCE and not seldom echoed later: ‘If earth is a god, then in justice I too am a god. For I sprung from earth, became a corpse, and from a corpse (became) earth again.’ A new specimen even substitutes ‘dung’ (κόπρος) for ‘earth’.⁴³ How can death be treated so frivolously?

What we do not yet find in stone epitaphs is a rejection of the whole idea of an afterlife, though we do get a call to restrict cult: ‘don’t pointlessly bring me drink offerings – I did my drinking while alive – or food. Enough. All that is nonsense (φλῆναφος). But if for the sake of memory and the times we shared you bring saffron and frankincense, friends – appropriate gifts these for those who have received me – these are right for those below; corpses have nothing of what the living have.’ This is mild compared to some later deprecations of funerary cult: once it is pointed out that libations merely muddy the ground.⁴⁴ Epicureanism appears on stone only in negative reflection, praise for a philosopher who rejected its godless doctrines and is wished godspeed on his journey to the chambers of the pious.⁴⁵ But in this case the epigraphic record seems to mislead, because a superb literary epigram of the third century by Callimachus expresses for the first time the idea of absolute nothingness. ‘Charidas, what is there below?’ ‘Much

desire. There is less emphasis on the pseudo-consolation in these last two, as in *Anth. Pal.* 7.483 = Gow-Page *HE* Anon. xlvii: the child has become a plaything for Persephone but has left grim grief at home. For later examples (also the Ganymede motif), see Obryk (n. 15), B 1–3, 6–8, and Moretti’s note on *IGUR* III 1344. For sarcophagi showing a bird snatching a boy, see F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris, 1942), 97 n. 2; P. Zanker and B. C. Ewald, *Living with Myths. The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi*, translated by J. Slater (Oxford, 2012), 62. Slightly different are Peek, *GVI* 1765, *Steinepigramme* 05/01/64 (Smyrna, 3rd century CE): Hermes brought me to heaven, where I now pour nectar; *Steinepigramme* 01/20/27 (Miletus, 2nd century CE): Athena brought you to heaven and you are honoured with the gods, not having drunk Lethe. On the ‘divine escort’ theme, cf. n. 35.

⁴² See G. Staab, *Epigraphica Anatolica* 45 (2012), 47–54, publishing what is now *I. Priene B-M* 405 (*SEG* 62, 907), and citing the later parallels. That all these cases refer to drowning is not clear to me.

⁴³ Peek, *GVI* 1126 (Eretria), based on a couplet ascribed to Epicharmus (fr. 297 K.-A.; Page, *FGE* p. 154); cf. e.g. Peek, *GVI* 1941 (Thisbe, 2nd/3rd century CE); new specimen: *SEG* 64, 2024 (where two Latin versions are mentioned)/ *BE* 2019 no. 557 (Cyrene, late Hellenistic).

⁴⁴ See n. 19. Muddy: Peek, *GVI* 1906, there cited. The text quoted: Peek, *GVI* 1363 (Astypalaia, 1st century BCE).

⁴⁵ Peek, *GVI* 2018, *Steinepigramme* 01/20/25 (Miletus, 2nd century BCE).

darkness.’ ‘And returns to earth?’ ‘A lie.’ ‘And Plouton?’ ‘A myth.’ ‘We are done for.’ ‘That’s my true account for you all; but if you want the pleasant one, one can buy a big ox for five pence in Hades.’⁴⁶

Very different is an epitaph of the third century BCE from Pherai (*SEG* 28, 528). ‘I, Lycophon son of Philiskos, (am) in seeming (*doxa*) from the stock of mighty Zeus, but in reality (*aletheia*) from immortal fire. And I live among the stars of heaven raised up by my father, but my body occupies earth, mother of my mother.’⁴⁷ The distinction between perishable body and something that survives elsewhere is familiar, that between a supposed and a real origin (the former probably a family claim, startlingly rejected) unique. The role of fire might suggest Stoicism, the contrast between an earthly and a heavenly parent possibly Orphism,⁴⁸ but this text is a *unicum*, hard to pin down.

Mysteries: the unuttered hope

Three Hellenistic epitaphs touch on a theme, that of mysteries, which is at all periods extraordinarily rare in epitaphs exposed to public view.⁴⁹ Since mysteries, or some mysteries at least, promised initiates a better lot in the afterlife, one might have expected constant reference to them, but the claim ‘because initiated, therefore blessed’ never appears in a simple form. The Athenian Isidore was initiated both on Samothrace and at Eleusis, but the only causal conclusion drawn in his epitaph is that this allowed him to live to eighty; the request to the ‘cold hand of Hades’ to lead him to the place of the pious is separate. Two others assign the dead man, respectively, a place among *mystai* and a role as supervisor of mystic rites, but do not justify these privileges by reference to initiation; perhaps it is just assumed.⁵⁰ A causal connection is established only by one Meniketes, who claims to have avoided

⁴⁶ *Anth. Pal.* 7. 524 = Callimachus XXXI in Gow-Page, *HE*.

⁴⁷ I translate so, but ‘my mother’s body occupies mother earth’ is also possible; A. Avagianou, *Kernos* 15 (2002), 75, offers ‘the body born of my mother occupies mother-earth’, which strains the genitive.

⁴⁸ See F. Graf and S. I. Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife*, second edition (London, 2013), text 1.10 and often.

⁴⁹ So already Rohde (n. 24), 542, but there is no taboo in book poetry: see Posidippus 43 (an epitaph) and 118.25 (wish to travel the ‘mystic path’ to Rhadamanthys in old age) in C. Austin and G. Bastianini, *Posidippi Pellaei quae supersunt omnia* (Milan, 2002).

⁵⁰ Isidore: *SEG* 55, 723 (2nd/1st century BCE), from Amphipolis(?); *mystai*/mystic rites: Peek, *GVI* 1822, *IG IX*, I².2.313 (Akarnania, 2nd century BCE); Peek, *GVI* 1916 (Rhodes, early 2nd century BCE, with rather clear allusions to the gods of Eleusis). A dead boy in Peek, *GVI* 1029.7–12 (Attica, 2nd century CE) tells of all the rites his father duly involved him in, including perhaps at

Acheron's grim path and 'run to the harbours of the blessed' because he had 'fitted/furnished the linen-covered couch of the goddess [Isis] of which the uninitiated may not speak'.⁵¹ But he had clearly done rather more for the goddess than just undergo initiation.

From the imperial period come several epitaphs for children who participated in rites of Dionysus; here initiation is clearly implied, but no benefit in the afterlife is mentioned and is sometimes implicitly excluded, even though a text of Plutarch speaks of such a promise being made.⁵² A funerary epitaph of c.235 CE from Eleusis tells of the death in old age of a *hierophant*, and concludes 'this is a fine revelation given by the blessed ones, that death is not just not an evil for mortals, but a good'. Even this, which might at last be seen as an allusion to the mystic promise, can be read pessimistically: if not just an initiate's death but any death is a good, is this not the sad old truth that it is better never to be born?⁵³ Initiation was very common: many more of the dead whose epitaphs we read must have been Eleusinian initiates than we can identify from their epitaphs.⁵⁴ Why this gap existed between what initiates were told to expect in the afterlife and what was recorded on their graves is a puzzle. Mystic secrecy? Cognitive dissonance? People who were buried with the famous 'Orphic' gold tablets, by contrast, might proclaim themselves as *mystai* in hope of reward, but only to a secret audience, the guardians of the Underworld.⁵⁵

Eleusis, but this is self-praise by the father, and the only conclusion drawn is that those loved by the gods die young.

⁵¹ *Steinepigramme* 09/14/01, P. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II. North Coasts of the Black Sea, Asia Minor* (Berlin, 2014), no. 102 (Bithynia or N. Mysia, 2nd/1st century BCE).

⁵² Usefully collected in Harland (n. 51), 55–8. Peek, *GVI* 974, *IGUR* III 1228, Rome (1st/2nd century CE) is particularly desolate. The nearest approach to comfort is the seventeen-year-old Ioulianos' claim that Bromios had seized him to be a συμμύστης (fellow-initiate), *Steinepigramme* 04/19/02 (Hermos valley, 240/1 CE). Plutarch, *Consolatio ad Uxorem* 611D.

⁵³ Peek, *GVI* 879, *I. Eleusis* 646. Pessimistic reading: A. D. Nock, 'Orphism or Popular Philosophy?', *HTR* 33 (1940), 301–15 (reprinted in his *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, edited by Z. Stewart [Oxford 1972], 503–15), and Rohde (n. 24), 542; the other reading is assumed by W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 21. The 'reward' given by Demeter to her *hierophantis* in *I. Eleusis* 502.12–14 is for good service, not for being an initiate.

⁵⁴ The fact of Eleusinian initiation is very seldom mentioned in epitaphs: I know only *SEG* 55, 723 (n. 50) and *IG* II² 11674.12 if correctly supplemented. I know no parallel for Αουία μύστα χῶλε (Aouia, initiate, farewell) inscribed above Peek, *GVI* 907 (Thessaly, 1st century BCE). I am not convinced by the allusions to the Eleusinian mysteries and the Thesmophoria detected by Tsagalis (n. 7), 311–13, in 4th century BCE Attic epigrams, nor that to the Samothracian mysteries detected by the bishop of Seeland (F. Münter, *Erklärung einer griechischen Inschrift, welche auf die Samothracischen Mysterien Beziehung hat* [Copenhagen, 1810]) in Peek, *GVI* 1329 (see n. 90).

⁵⁵ See Graf and Johnston (n. 48), texts 1.16, 20–2, 27–8.

Imperial

I turn now to the imperial period, and like Peek I will in the main, a little apologetically, treat all the material it provides, much greater in quantity than what precedes, as a single undivided mass. Everything seen so far continues, but in most cases trickles have become floods. The material is so abundant and in detail so varied that I can do no more than give a taste; a question arising that would deserve separate treatment is that of interchange with the strong Roman tradition.⁵⁶ (A different cultural tradition again is certainly seen in exhortations and wishes addressed to those with an interest in Greco-Egyptian cults, such as ‘be of good comfort [εὐψύχει]. May Osiris give you the cold water’, or the claim to ‘tend the seat of Osiris of Abydos; I have not set foot in the homes of the dead’.⁵⁷) The most interesting main theme may be the strong emergence of popular Epicureanism. Claims to have lived for pleasure had already been made in the fourth century BCE, and continue,⁵⁸ but more common becomes an exhortation to do the same, and an accompanying insistence on the finality of death. Two-verse examples from many – a young athlete describes his brief and successful career, and turns to advice: ‘Friend, death is fated for all, nor can anyone come back home after death. Understand this and cheer up your much-suffering spirit. Drink, indulge, enjoy the gifts of golden Aphrodite. It was through chance [ἀτομάτως] that I flowered and enjoyed my prime and left the light.’ ‘I didn’t exist, I came into being. I was, I am not. **That’s all [τοσαῦτα]**. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. I will not be.’ (The second is accompanied, a little surprisingly, by a maxim warning against rash speech.⁵⁹) Those two examples reflect orthodox

⁵⁶ Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), treated both, subsequent studies have not. Note how many of the Greek epitaphs that I quote come from Rome.

⁵⁷ See e.g. *IGUR* I 432 and *RICIS* 403/0401, with further references in each case; Peek, *GVI* 1090 (Alexandria, 2nd century CE?); V. Gasparini, “I will not be thirsty. My lips will not be dry.” Individual Strategies of Reconstructing the Afterlife in the Isiac cults’, in K. Waldner, R. Gordon and W. Spickermann (eds.), *Burial Rituals, Ideas of Afterlife, and the Individual in the Hellenistic World and the Roman Empire* (Stuttgart, 2016), 125–50. These expressions are discussed by Obryk (n. 15), 122–6, under the rubric of ‘influence of cults’, but Gasparini, 138, denies any link with mysteries and initiation.

⁵⁸ See nn. 29–30 and e.g. Peek, *GVI* 721, *IGUR* III 1274 (Rome, 2nd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1113a, *Steinepigramme* 16/04/04 (Apameia Kibotos, 3rd century CE).

⁵⁹ *Steinepigramme* 18/01/19 (Termessos, 2nd/3rd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1959, *IGUR* III 1398 (Rome, 2nd/3rd century CE; for co-existence with other advice on living, cf. Peek, *GVI* 1958, *Steinepigramme* 18/01/14, Termessos, 3rd century CE, where the advice is ‘act justly, fairly, well’). For many comparable examples of popular Epicureanism, see Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1),

Epicureanism, but once at least the advice to present enjoyment is uttered by someone whose ‘soul has leapt up to Olympus’.⁶⁰

The second of those epitaphs is a transposition into verse of a thought more commonly expressed (with small variations) in prose: ‘I was not anybody, and it did not matter to me; I am not anybody, and it does not matter to me.’ **‘These things [ταῦτα]** which you see are life. I was not, and I came into being. I am not, and it does not matter to me.’⁶¹ That thought has a well-known Latin equivalent *non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*, ‘I was not, I became, I am not, I care not’, often reduced to an acronym: nffnsnc. The abbreviation shows how familiar and acceptable such sentiments were. The phrases highlighted in bold above (τοσαῦτα, ταῦτα) also often appear by themselves, apparently as an abbreviation of a similar thought: that is all there is to life. Simple pessimism could be expressed in other ways too, such as ‘I who once existed have become this: a stele, a tomb, a stone, an image’, ‘mortals have nothing good to hope for’ (ἄμμοροι ἐσθλήζ/ἐλπίδος ἄνθρωποι).⁶² Just occasionally perhaps the gloomy ταῦτα, ‘that’s all there is’, received a mental supplement ‘to life (in this world)’. One reason to suspect this is that such a ταῦτα appears on a funerary monument which on one face recommends, in elegiacs, generosity to friends and restrained hedonism, but on another switches to iambics and speaks of the resurrection (*anastasis*) of the just – a Christian or Jewish text, therefore. Old pagan wisdom about living for the present (with a little extra emphasis on service to others) is there juxtaposed with new hopes.⁶³

260–3; Peek, *GVI* 1995–9; L. Robert, *Hellenica* XIII (Paris, 1965), 184–9; note on *IGUR* III 1159; W. Ameling, ‘φάγομεν καὶ πίωμεν’, *ZPE* 60 (1985), 35–43; *Steinepigramme* V, 339, index, s.v. Geniesse das Leben; *IGBulg* V 5236. For prose examples, see *I. Kios* 78 with note. Note too the formula ζῶν κτῶ χρῶ (while alive, get, use) (for the most recent example, see *Gephyra* 18 [2019], 138–42, no. 1).

⁶⁰ Peek, *GVI* 1146, *IGUR* III 1329 (Rome, 2nd/3rd century CE).

⁶¹ *TAM* V, ii 1147 (Thyatira); *SEG* 19, 808 (Pisidia), both undated. For more cases and the many studies, see *BE* 1950 no. 204 at p. 207 (or in brief Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), 83–5); Peres (n. 15), 27–30; and for ταῦτα (these things, i.e. ‘that’s all there is’), *I. North Galatia* nos. 290, 307, with notes. On the theme ‘death is the end’ see Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), 74–7.

⁶² Peek, *GVI* 1331, *Steinepigramme* 04/21/03 (Kula in Lydia, 150–200 CE); Peek, *GVI* 1938, *IGUR* III 1305, line 11 (Rome, 2nd century CE).

⁶³ Peek, *GVI* 1905, *Steinepigramme* 16/06/01 (Eumeneia in Phrygia, shortly before 212?). Christian or Jewish: A. R. R. Sheppard, *Anatolian Studies* 29 (1979), 176–80; P. R. Trebilco, *Mediterraneo Antico* 5 (2002), 79–80. For a denial of *anastasis*, resurrection, see *SEG* 65, 530 (Thessalonike, century 250 CE).

Strong though the pessimistic current is, it is not dominant. Many (themselves, or their soul in contrast to their body⁶⁴) are still going to the place of the blessed or pious, joining the heroes, or *daimones*, flying to Olympus, and so on. Such a destination can even be envisaged in epitaphs that have begun by recommending present pleasure, because the future holds nothing.⁶⁵ A theme perhaps new to epitaphs is that of the relative becoming a star; sometimes even a specific location in the sky is identified.⁶⁶ Other desirable homes were also possible: a young Macedonian is now, we learn, ‘living with the Nymphs in the groves of Mt. Kissos, taking pleasure in his horses and dogs and spears’.⁶⁷ But the great Rohde observed that, though one can express despair in prose, these expressions of hope require verse, a step away therefore from everyday tangible reality.⁶⁸ As a counter-case one might note that, even in prose, relatives ‘make heroes’ (ἀφηρωίζειν) of their kin or these ‘become gods’ (ἀποθεοῦσθαι),⁶⁹ and in many regions the designation ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’ for a dead person is very common: ‘Hinz und Kunz’ (Tom, Dick and Harry) are so honoured, Wilamowitz said sourly. Complicated issues arise here: it must certainly be allowed that some ‘New heroes in antiquity’⁷⁰ shared the powers of older heroes, but this does not prove that all did; the very frequency of the title in some regions surely argues that they did not, and must even

⁶⁴ On different conceptions of what survives, see Obyrk (n. 15), 157–85.

⁶⁵ Peek, *GVI* 1112, *Steinepigramme* 9/08/04 (Prusias, 3rd century CE?); Peek, *GVI* 1146, *IGUR* III 1329 (Rome, 2nd/3rd century CE). For epitaphs exploiting the soul/body contrast, see Obyrk (n. 15), 14–37 nos. A1–A11; for possible residences of fortunate souls, Obyrk (n. 15), 58–77 B 11–20. But in a text from Phrygia the poet apparently regrets that the πόλος (vault [of heaven]) is not accessible to mortals: *BE* 2022 no. 513.

⁶⁶ E.g. in Peek, *GVI* 1829, *Steinepigramme* 01/20/29 (Miletus, 1st century CE?), the boy’s star is beside the horn of Amaltheia; for more, see Peres, (n. 15); Obyrk (n. 15), Ch. 4, texts D 1–8; A. Wypustek, *Images of Eternal Beauty in Funerary Verse Inscriptions* (Leiden, 2013), 48–53; on the ‘astral soul’, see T. Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London, 1994), 110–11. Possibly it is already late Hellenistic: *Steinepigramme* 01/19/42 (Didyma) and now the Pergamene epitaph for the politician Dion, *Chiron* 47 (2017), 339–65 (*BE* 2018 no. 371), where the text merely denies he has gone to Hades, but the iconography suggests katasterism.

⁶⁷ *SEG* 65, 525 (2nd century CE).

⁶⁸ Rohde (n. 24), 540.

⁶⁹ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Glaube der Hellenen*, 2 volumes (Darmstadt, 1968; reprint with altered pagination of the original edition, Berlin 1931–2), II, 19; cf. H. Malay and G. Petzl, *New Religious Texts from Lydia* (Vienna, 2017), 60; for dead persons spoken of as gods: *BE* 1964 no. 596.

⁷⁰ Title of C. P. Jones’ important monograph (Cambridge, MA, 2010). Frequency: Samos is a good case, as the index to *IG* XII, VI, II, pp. 703–4, shows; on Thera too it was virtually universal. Jones, *ibid.*, 65, argues ‘the same word can hardly be meaningless when applied to one set of heroes and meaningful when applied to others’, but context (and associated ritual) distinguishes, as it does e.g. with the two meanings of the English word ‘doctor’.

make it doubtful whether, by calling loved ones ‘hero’ or ‘heroine’, one expressed much hope that they would be enjoying a privileged status in the afterlife. One of the most depressed of all epitaphs is accompanied by a formulaic farewell to the dead youth, who is none the less addressed as a ‘hero’.⁷¹ As for apotheosis, the advice to two young Lydians to ‘bear their mother’s apotheosis with patience’ discourages from pressing the word too hard. (Cicero was determined to build a ‘shrine’ [*fanum*] for his daughter, ‘in order to achieve apotheosis, as far as may be’: apotheosis of memory, therefore.⁷²)

But in verse prospects can seem much brighter. Some of these optimistic imperial epitaphs amaze one by the boldness and confidence of their claims, particularly when voiced in the first person. An extreme case is a quasi-metrical text from Mesembria in Thrace: ‘Here I lie, the goddess Hekate as you see. Of old I was mortal, but now I am immortal and ageless.’ There follow biographical details of the usual type. ‘As you see’ refers to the accompanying reliefs, which show several variants of the dead woman assimilated to Hekate. A father in Egypt declares that ‘I will no longer sacrifice to you, daughter, with laments, now that I have learnt that you have become a goddess’. He lists in detail the offerings she will receive henceforth, a nymph seized by the nymphs (a very positive version therefore of the ‘seized by nymphs’ motif).⁷³ Such addresses to the deceased as now a god (not usually a named god) occur very occasionally even in prose, more often in Latin.⁷⁴ Art too can indulge in comforting imaginings, representing the dead person in the form of an identifiable god (but an accompanying epitaph may strike a gloomier note).⁷⁵ One document which appears truly to reflect an individual experience is put in the mouth of a dead girl killed by a thunderbolt, who declares ‘I wasn’t mortal; I immediately appeared

⁷¹ Peek, *GVI* 1923, *Steinepigramme* 08/01/51 (Kyzikos, 1st century CE).

⁷² Herrmann-Malay, *Lydia*, no. 96. 28–9; Cic. *Att.* 12.36 (tr. Shackleton-Bailey): *ut maxime adsequar ὑποθέωσιν*. On all this cf. M. Waelkens, ‘Privatdeifikation in Kleinasien und in der griechisch-römischen Welt’, in R. Donceel and R. Lebrun (eds.), *Archéologie et religions de l’Anatolie antique* (Torino, 1984), 259–307, esp. n. 192.

⁷³ Peek, *GVI* 438a, *IGBulg.* I² 345 (2nd century CE?); Peek, *GVI* 1897, *I.Egypte métriques* 87 (Hermupolis Magna, 2nd century CE). On the nymphs motif, see n. 42. Very positive also are the rare epitaphs offering some precision about the blessed afterlife, see n. 87.

⁷⁴ In brief, *BE* 1964 no. 596; Waelkens (n. 72).

⁷⁵ H. Wrede, *Consecratio in formam deorum, Vergöttlichte Privatpersonen in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz, 1981); Zanker and Ewald (n. 41), 190–9; a remarkable new example, *BE* 2019 no. 259. The relief accompanying Peek, *GVI* 1028, *IG X 2*, 1 no. 454 (Thessaloniki, c.2nd century CE) presents the dead boy as Heracles, but the epitaph has him in Hades ‘sharing neither in good nor evil’. Peek, *GVI* 1030, *IGUR III* 1324 (Rome, 2nd century CE) is engagingly artless: ‘I am called Saturninos. From a boy my father and mother have made me into an image of Dionysus.’

to my mother during darkest night' and consoled her, explaining that Zeus had taken her soul, now immortal, to heaven.⁷⁶ The real experience, if such it was, was that of the mother, who dreamt of her on the night of her death. But nothing similar is likely to underlie most of these claims. Among themes that are new in epitaphs of the imperial period – all optimistic – are hopes associated with Isis and Osiris⁷⁷ and the aspiration to be reunited with loved ones in death;⁷⁸ the fantasy of retaining consciousness post Lethe is perhaps already late Hellenistic.⁷⁹

Philosophy?

The epitaph was scarcely the place to try out original thought. It is hard to find any idea in the epitaphs that is not found elsewhere, usually much earlier; the extreme case is the fantasy of the dead person becoming a star, absent from stones until the late Hellenistic period at earliest, but already mentioned in Aristophanes.⁸⁰ Some of what we might regard as the best attested afterlife beliefs of antiquity never appear in unambiguous form: there are no clear allusions to Pythagorean reincarnation,⁸¹ or the probably Orphic idea of a burden

⁷⁶ Peek, *GVI* 1993, *Steinepigramme* 04/05/07 (Thyateira, Lydia, imperial?).

⁷⁷ See e.g. Peek, *GVI* 1163, Obryk (n. 15), 113 D 10 (Megalopolis, 2nd/3rd century CE): a blessed servant of Isis who as she approached the altar and prayed 'went to the stars revered by all, for going to the demi gods without disease'; for more, see Obryk, 117–30 E 1–5; Gasparini (n. 57), 125–50.

⁷⁸ See e.g. Peek, *GVI* 1736, *IGUR* III 1349 (Rome, 2nd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 727, *Steinepigramme* 20/05/08 (Syria, 2nd/3rd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1397, *Steinepigramme* 18/09/04 (Pisidia, 2nd/3rd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1704 (Melos, after 3rd century CE); cf. Peek, *GVI* 1876, *Steinepigramme* 18/01/26, Obryk (n. 15), 91–2 C 9 (Termessos, 2nd century CE?), where it is an unreal wish. In *Steinepigramme* 16/31/93 B 3 (Phrygia, early 4th century CE), a husband is made to claim that his wife died from desire to join him in Hades. Other epitaphs more modestly anticipate burial together (cf. Hansen, *CEG* 512, 4th century BCE, Piraeus, where it is presented as a fact): Peek, *GVI* 1896 (Ostia, 2nd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 723, *IGUR* III 1391 (Rome, 2nd/3rd century CE); Peek, *GVI* 1998.17 (Athens, 3rd/4th century CE); and much more in Lattimore, *Themes* (n. 1), 247–9.

⁷⁹ See n. 36.

⁸⁰ Ar. *Pax* 832–3; n. 66.

⁸¹ The closest approach is Peek, *GVI* 1133, *Steinepigramme* 05/01/63 (Smyrna, 2nd century CE): 'if it possible to be re-born, sleep [holds you not for long]; but if one cannot come back, eternal [sleep].' The relief accompanying Peek, *GVI* 1805, *Steinepigramme* 04/24/02 (Philadelphia, 1st century CE) contains the Pythagorean Y, symbolizing the choice of paths between virtue and vice, but there is no hint of more arcane doctrine. The 'corpse that sees the light again' because judged pious among the dead in Peek, *GVI* 1169, *IGUR* III 1321 (Rome, 3rd/4th century CE) does so, apparently, because brought home by ship for burial. On Orphism, see A. Wypustek, 'Orphic Elements in Greek Funerary Verse Inscriptions', *Littera Antiqua* 9 (2014), 119–40. I doubt even the 'isolated terms of – perhaps – Orphic provenience' that he allows on p. 129 (but

of inherited guilt to be worked off. Ideas or turns of phrase that recall speculative thought appear here and there. A late epitaph from Aphrodisias may show a touch of neo-Platonism.⁸² Several epitaphs exploit in different ways the idea of death as a return to an earlier and better, perhaps even divine, condition: (a) ‘His soul has flown to Olympus and is with its previous associates (καὶ σύνεστιν οἷς τὸ πρίν).’ (b) ‘I’ve gone back to my springs, leaving the bond (*desmos*) by which nature bound me.’ (c) ‘Nor was he mortal, but by compulsion of the high-ruler bound in a blind [?] tomb he accomplished his path. . . he has gone along the path of the blessed ones, and left behind deadly want among corpses.’ This last phrase is obscure, but possibly denigrates what we would call the living as ‘corpses’, from the wretchedness of life among whom he has now escaped. (d) ‘His immortal heart has leapt to the place of the blessed. The soul which gives life and came down from the gods is ever-living. . . The body is the tunic (*chiton*) of the soul. Revere my god.’⁸³ Such claims may make one think above all of Empedocles, who represented himself as an exile from the gods, wandering on Earth wrapped in a tunic of flesh, but destined ultimately to rejoin the company of the blessed.⁸⁴ But a key element in Empedocles’ conception, that he was exiled for a crime, is never hinted at in the epitaphs. And the idea of the separable soul, a thing more valuable than the body, is Pythagorean/Platonic too.

We are dealing here with fragments of thought torn from their original context. They can slip in amid much more conventional themes: in a long epitaph for her father, for instance, known unusually from a papyrus, a daughter in Egypt stresses his wealth and closeness to ‘kings’, his virtue which will secure him a place in Elysium (guaranteed to him long since by a ‘good fate’, not a philosophical notion), whence

see p. 229 above on Lycophron son of Philiskos). For Peek, *GVI* 1812 (Bosporos, imperial) as popular philosophy, not Orphism see Nock (n. 53) (but for the other view, see *SEG* 45, 624). The speaker of the obscure epigram Peek, *GVI* 1113, *IGUR* III 1351 (Rome, late 3rd/early 4th century CE), declares he has not enquired into what it is not *themis* to know, whether he existed before or will exist again.

⁸² *SEG* 63, 859, with C. P. Jones, ‘Two Late Antique Inscriptions from Aphrodisias’, *EA* 46 (2013 [2014]), 169–75.

⁸³ (a) Peek, *GVI* 881.4–5 (Athens, 3rd century CE?); (b) Peek, *GVI* 989.1–2 (Krommyon, 2nd/3rd century CE); (c) Peek, *GVI* 1283, *IGUR* III 1163 (where see commentary), Obryk (n. 15), 139–42, E 10 (Rome, 4th century CE for Peek, 180–250 for *IGUR*): in line 8 I translate the reading of Rohde (n. 24), 573 n. 141, εἰν ἀλαῶ, revived by Obryk; (d) Peek, *GVI* 1763, Obryk (n. 15), 137–9, E 9 (Sabine hills, 1st/2nd century CE).

⁸⁴ See especially Empedocles B 115 and 126 Diels/Kranz.

he has ‘easily passed to immortal life, gratefully shaking off dire birth’ (*geneē*, i.e. life in the body) – only at the end intrudes the philosophers’ idea of life in the body as an evil.⁸⁵ One sometimes encounters expressions with a vaguely scientific or philosophical or mystical ring, such as ‘I’ve given life back to time who lent it me’, ‘Before I was made of water and earth and *pneuma*, but I have given all that back to all (those elements) as I lie in death’, ‘I have cast off [ἀνέλυσσα] to the gods’,⁸⁶ but a vaguely scientific (or philosophical, or mystical) ring is all they are.

The vast mass of compositions lacks such pretensions. Most verse epitaphs, it is worth stressing, take no position at all on the fate of the soul after death: they seek to convey grief and to commemorate. (And verse epitaphs are hugely outnumbered by those in prose, which, again, eschew speculation, the despairing formulae ταῦτα and *nffnsnc*⁸⁷ aside.) Within the minority of verse epitaphs that engage with eschatology, there is little attempt to imagine the afterlife in concrete terms: many people are going to the place of the pious, but, in contrast to a famous fragment of Pindar, they are not usually engaging in sport or playing drafts, nor even drinking (no trace of Plato’s ‘symposium of the righteous’). Just occasionally they hobnob with the likes of Orpheus or Asklepios, pour nectar at a divine banquet (the ‘Ganymede’ motif), join Dionysus’ mystic dances; it can be stressed that the isles of the blessed are free from all the ills of mortal life,⁸⁸ but the norm is vagueness. Figures such as Minos and Aiakos and Rhadamanthys make occasional appearances. Two absences are predictable: the grimness of Hades is often brought out by a single epithet, but seldom more fully;⁸⁹ and the converse to the place of the

⁸⁵ Peek, *GVI* 1949 (Hermupolis, 3rd century CE).

⁸⁶ Peek, *GVI* 1132, *Steinepigramme* 04/24/15 (Lydia, 2nd century CE) (for the loan and paying back image, see *IGUR* III 1326 and *MAMA* XI 285 with notes); Peek, *GVI* 1942.7–8 (Tomis, 2nd–3rd century CE); *IGUR* III 1136 (Rome, imperial), with note. An epitaph from Attica, Peek, *GVI* 1307.6–7 (2nd/3rd century CE), makes the kind of point one might look for in a Cynic diatribe: ‘the halls of Plouteus are full of riches, because they need nothing’.

⁸⁷ See n. 61.

⁸⁸ For all these, see Obryk (n. 15). Even Marcellus of Side’s 98 lines on Herodes Atticus’ wife Regilla (*IGUR* III 1155: not in Peek, *GVI*), adduced by Rohde (n. 24), 571 n. 131, contain little. Cf. Pindar *Threnos* VII (fr. 129–131) Snell-Maehler; Plat. *Resp.* 393C.

⁸⁹ The grimmest I have noted are Peek, *GVI* 457, *IGUR* III 1381 (Rome, 1st century CE): ‘I, wretch, have been buried under the earth here, leaving the sweet breath (of life) for an underground place [μυχός] covered in much eternal darkness’; the very grim Peek, *GVI* 1684 (cf. p. 221 n. 13 above), where the dead girl will hear not her parents’ laments but the grim noises made by the dead beside Kokytos; *Steinepigramme* 16/31/93 A 7–9 (Appia or Soa in Phrygia, 300–50 CE), three lines on the absence of light (put in a probably pagan father’s mouth by a perhaps Christian daughter).

pious, that of the wicked, is never mentioned even as a foil. The possibility of a post-mortem judgement is almost unspoken of; when once it is raised, the dead person is reassured that it will go his way.⁹⁰ What about the standard Homeric Hades, the place for those neither especially good nor bad, the middle ground where the majority are likely to find themselves? About this too almost nothing is said: in the epitaph world you can be pious, or you can deny the reality of the afterlife, but, if you are not notably pious but suspect death is not the end, it is not clear what will happen to you. An answer might have been offered in some cases by initiation, but, as mentioned earlier, this popular practice is to a surprising degree absent from most of these texts. The consolation, such as it is, that occurs again and again is simply the thought that nobody can escape from death.

In conclusion, I revert to the question of the individual voice. As noted earlier, there is much less simple repetition, much more variety, in this material than might have been expected, though a particular individual voice can very seldom be detected with confidence. But let us revert to some singularities, some apparently of belief, one of character. One of just a handful of Greek verse epitaphs from France is spoken by a young sailor, and contains an arresting address to the passer-by: 'I a young man [*kouros*], dear to god, no longer mortal, call to you'; his self-description as *kouros* anticipates a comparison he goes on to make between himself and those protectors of sailors, the Dios Kouroi. He concludes: 'Among the dead there are two companies, of which one is borne along on earth, the other dances with the constellations in the upper air. To that company I belong, and I have god for my leader.' No one has pinned down this last conception of the two companies – it looks original.⁹¹ Next, a husband and wife on Corcyra speak successively. The wife declares in elegiacs that, obedient to the god who orders the world, she has surrendered her body, but 'the soul that was given to me lives in a heavenly home' (this thought is several times repeated; she also mentions her child and husband). Her husband Euodos, perhaps the author of two

Paradoxically it is in a Christian epitaph that we encounter 'Wailing Erinyes in Acheron': *MAMA X 275, Steinepigramme 16/32/04* (near Kotiaion in Phrygia, 3rd/4th century CE).

⁹⁰ Peek, *GVI 1474* (Rheneia, 1st century CE).

⁹¹ Peek, *GVI 1329, IG France 10* (with commentary: Marseilles, 3rd century CE) – cf. n. 54; on 'god as leader', cf. Rohde (n. 24), 573 n. 144.

pieces ascribed to a Euodos in the Palatine anthology, and so perhaps also of this whole composition, answers much more briefly in Phalaecians and urges present enjoyment, since ‘when you go down to your drink of Lethe, you will never from below see any of the things above’.⁹² A satire on male and female sensibilities? An invitation to the reader to synthesize the two attitudes? The stone does not reveal. A Lycian engagingly admits to have pondered ‘where life’s living track ends or what remains of the body when the breath has taken flight’, but, as an insurance, has built this tomb for himself and his faithful wife. This message is conveyed in a poem that contains an acrostich (to which he draws attention) on his own name, Aristodemos.⁹³ As a comic coda there is a long and quirky poem from Egypt. The author blends biographical information, an assurance to the passer-by that his nose will not be offended by smelly cedar-oil, an insistence that he does not want mourning women or a second burial, and the explanation that a bad fate or the common law of death did for him, ‘using a cough as instrument’.⁹⁴ This last detail might remind one of Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* on her late husband: ‘Gout flying upwards soared with Mr F to another sphere.’ But despite such singularities, we cannot dig deep into the individuality of any of these people, and this is the problem confronting the quest for the individual in ancient religion. What we can do is to stress the range of choices available to the individual, and this is perhaps the crucial point to bring out: there was ample room for manoeuvre within ancient cult, no one was bound to a single publicly prescribed set of religious actions or beliefs.⁹⁵

But that conclusion may suggest a second conclusion. In some societies, many individuals have entertained a firm belief in a life to come. We can call these ‘strong belief’ societies, though without claiming that every member of such societies nurtured strong or indeed

⁹² Peek, *GVI* 1978, Obryk (n. 15), 28–9 A 8, *IG IX*, 1, 4 1024 (2nd century CE); cf. *Anth. Pal.* 16. 116, 155.

⁹³ Peek, *GVI* 261, *Steinepigramme* 17/08/04 (Sidyma, 1st/2nd century CE).

⁹⁴ Peek, *GVI* 1975, *I.Egypte métriques* 97 (Hermupolis Magna, 2nd century CE).

⁹⁵ Cf. R. Parker, ‘Religion in the Polis or Polis Religion?’, ΠΡΑΚΤΙΚΑ ΤΗΣ ΑΚΑΔΗΜΙΑΣ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ 93 B (2018 [2019]), 20–39 (also in *Cleomenes on the Acropolis and Other Studies* [Liège, 2024], 139–54).

Rohde (n. 24), 539, characterizes the situation as ‘Where so much was permitted and so little proscribed’ (if one seeks this eloquent expression in the German original, one sees how freely the translator W. B. Hillis on occasion dealt with the very different structures of German, to create what is a masterpiece of academic translation).

any belief. How is such a belief sustained? Bereaved individuals often cannot accept bereavement, and believe, for a time at least, that they will be reunited with their loved ones. But such hopes fade. Belief in ghosts and spirits is said to exist in all societies. But such belief is scarcely connected to belief about one's own state after death. Strong belief societies depend on clear, explicit, and largely unchallenged teaching backed up by strong authority, as seen, for instance, in traditional Christianity and in Islam. The Greek world was not like that – even the Eleusinian mysteries, though presenting an explicit promise supported by high prestige, seem, as we have seen, to have failed to act as the rennet that coagulated hopes about the afterlife. Instead, such hopes had to be put together from shreds and patches – bits of the Homeric underworld, myths of mortals carried off by gods, cults paid to heroes, fragments of cosmology. Often they must have been 'Unreal Words' in the sense of J. H. Newman's sermon of that title, 'saying more than we feel'.⁹⁶ There was clarity and a uniform belief only on the negative side, on the part of those who said, 'I was not, I came into being, I am not'. Many epitaphs, we have seen, sent the dead person off to the place of the pious or other desirable locations, but when many said the opposite, and a majority said nothing at all on the subject, it would have been hard for more than a few optimistic individuals to put great hope in such formulas. The Greek world was characterized by strong belief about the existence of gods, but at best by weak belief about the fate of the individual after death.

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⁹⁶ J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1868–9), V, sermon 3. Cf. Nock, *Essays* (n. 53): 'except where a dogmatic religion is fully dominant, the expectation is normally tentative and hesitant; the individual does not and cannot hold it "As he believes in fire that it will burn/Or rain that it will drench him" [Browning, 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', 719–20 – left unidentified by Nock]'.