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Problems of Burial in Modern Greece: Between Customs, Law and Economy

This paper focuses on issues of complex relationships between religion and local tradition on the one side and needs of modern society, government laws and migrations on the other, as exemplified by funerals in modern Greece. Overcrowding in big urban centers, especially in municipalities of Athens, consequently led to a lack of space for traditional long-term burial by inhumation.

Key words: burial, cremation, *honestiri*, Greece, Athens, emigrants, tradition, religion, Church?¹

Exhumation follows after three to five years, when family members are forced to face (often un-decayed) remains of loved ones. The question arises concerning the ethical dimension of such a procedure and the emotional traumas it causes. Skeletons stripped of flesh undergo secondary burial by being laid into an ossuary. Cremation is not practiced, although cremation societies of citizens interested in it exist and Greek Parliament voted for the permission to build and operate crematories in 2006. However, Greece is still the only country member of European Union without a crematory. In Greece, Orthodox Christian faith is the official religion with significant social influence, which, consequently leads to a failure of implementation of cremation on its territory even for local and foreign citizens of other faiths and atheists. The deceased are being transported to the cheapest crematories in Bulgaria or, on rare occasions, to some of the “prestigious” ones in Western European countries.

Throughout human history many ways of treating dead human bodies existed in miscellaneous parts of the world and in different cultures, depending on a number of factors, such as ritual-religious practice, geo-climatic conditions and socio-economic situation. Most often it was a funeral (burial), which could be performed in several ways. So, there is inhumation (burial of the earthly remains), incineration (i.e. cremation – burning of the deceased) and mummification (Djurić-Srejić 1995, 96). Besides, some

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cultures use aquatic funeral, then explication and decarnation (deceased are surrendered to the effects of natural elements or exposed to birds and animals, for example “Sky burial” in Tibet (Djurić-Srejić 1995, 104-106; Faison 1999) or “towers of silence” by Pars and Zoroastrians in India and Iran) (Spiritual Science Research Foundation Inc 2012).

The problem

This paper focuses on issues of complex relationships between religion and local tradition on the one side and needs of modern society, laws and migrations on the other, as exemplified by funerals in modern Greece. Overcrowding in big urban centers, especially in municipalities of Athens, has consequently led to a lack of space for traditional long-term burial by inhumation, so they resort to exhumation in order to free up space for the *newly deceased*. Three years after the death and funeral of loved ones, family members are forced to face the remains, which often provokes emotional trauma. Depending on the cemetery, for an additional charge, there is the possibility for the dead to remain in the tomb for another year and up to three years. Most often dead bodies cannot decompose in such a short period of time. After tomb opening, corpses are transported by ordinary wheelbarrow to a special space where they are chopped into smaller pieces and subsequently buried at the part of cemetery with smaller graves for so-called “un-decayed”. A piece of tombstone with a name of the deceased is also transferred. Tombstones often get damaged during transportation (Fig.1),



for example a piece of cross can be missing and so on. Without any ceremony, the body is buried in order to decompose. Depending on cemetery practice, the body needs to be exhumed after a few months to check on its condition. When it finally reaches the necessary degree of decay, bones are taken out and stored in boxes in a separate

building. Next steps are, decaration and secondary burial. It is performed by laying bones of decarnated skeleton into ossuary (osteofilakio). (Fig.2).



A cheaper option is to put bones into metal boxes (osteothikes) and store them on the shelves in a separate building at the cemetery (Fig. 3).



If none of the close relatives show up at the exhumation, or if relatives have got no money to pay for the spot in the ossuary after secondary excavation, or if they stop paying after a while - those remains (either half-decomposed deceased in whom “nobody expressed interest”, as gravediggers say, or skeletal material) are placed into a fenced part of the graveyard known as “honeftiri” (χωνεψτήρι – translated as “to be digested”). From the outside that part looks like a grave with metal doors instead of a gravestone (Fig. 4).



The metal cover can be open and mortal remains are thrown into this ditch to be dissolved and become dust with the help of chemicals. Thus, accelerated destruction of the deceased does exist, just it is not performed by, but by chemical agents (Danforth 1982, 57-58; Alakiotis 2006, 35).

It is necessary to mention that exhumation and secondary burial of the skeleton exist in Greek tradition (especially in monasteries, for example at Mt.Athos), but they are performed only after a longer period of time when the process of decomposition is over (Danforth 1982, 47-56; Djurić-Srejić 1995, 116).

Several parameters determine the price of a funeral: the grave (or more often temporary grave site) location – there are three zones at graveyards and the price drops with the distance from the entrance, number of priests and chanters who participate in ceremony, quantity and quality of floral arrangements, size and quality of the tombstone and so on. It is possible to choose a “civil” funeral in Greece, which involves burial without religious ceremony.

The question arises why there is no possibility for cremation of mortal remains since cremation societies do exist. Although Greek Parliament voted for the permission to build and operate crematoriums in 2006, Greece is the only country member of European Union without a crematorium. This can be explained by the fact that Greek

Orthodox Christianity is the official religion with strong social influence, which, among other things, affects slow the resolution of the cremation problem even for those citizens who belong to other confessions, or declare themselves atheists. If family, after all, chooses cremation option for its deceased, the corps is transported to the cheapest crematories in Bulgaria or, rarely, to more prestigious ones in Western European countries. This way, the place of cremation represents a type of a status symbol.

The research

This paper is the outcome of field research conducted in Athens in 2012 and at the beginning of 2013. I decided to do this study after several upsetting conversations with my friends in Athens who had to be present at the exhumation of their parents². Their experience encouraged me to make a thorough study about the complex topic of funerals in Greece. There, among other numerous migrants from around the world also live a number of Serbian emigrants.³

Ancient funeral practices in Greece

Inhumation and incineration were practiced side by side in ancient Greece (Kurtz, Boardman 1994, 40-45). Numerous graveyards with skeletal remains testify about inhumation, while the urns found during archeological excavations are the evidence of incineration (Srejović 1997, 64-65).⁴

In ancient Greece, they believed that the soul of an unburied deceased was unable to reach the Elysian Fields and wandered restlessly until the funeral of the body (Tsantilas 1999, 36). From Homer's epics we learn about the fear of missing funeral, which represented the biggest insult for the dead. Odysseus expressed his concern when he was in danger of drowning, not because he would lose his life, but because he would not die a heroic death at the battlefield and be made worthy of a heroic funeral (Homer 1972, 142). In his play *Antigone*, Sophocles tells the story of the heroine who resolves to bury her brother Polynices in defiance of Creon's decree (Sofoklo 1990, 177-178, 182-183). It is interesting that these classical works talk about funerals as onetime acts. Namely, they do not mention excavation and secondary burial of the skeleton.

In general, one can say that in Ancient Greece incineration prevailed during the Archaic period (660-460 BC) and inhumation took over during the Hellenistic period (336-146 BC) (Djurić-Srejić 1995, 100; Cermanović-Kuzmanović, Srejović and Ćirilov 1997, 64-65). After the Greeks accepted Christianity, they switched exclusively to inhumation (Tsantilas 1999, 54-66).

² I would like to thank Mrs. Charula Chalkia, president of "Association of Friends of Cremation" and Mr. Antonis Alakiotis, president of "Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece" for help and valuable information from their archives. I would also like to thank mortician Nicholas Kiriakidis from Athens. My gratitude goes to Chris Pittakas, from Athens, as well, for his useful suggestions and comments during creation of the manuscript and to Vangelis Paterakis, the municipal clerk from Athens for photographs and information regarding funerals at Athens cemeteries.

³ Important Serbian memorial cemeteries Zejtinlik in Thessaloniki and *Blue Graves* in the waters of Ionian Sea as well as ossuary on the Vido island near Corfu (Blagojević 2012, 126) are also there.

⁴ One of the most famous was the urn of Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great.

Cremation of the dead in Christian world

In the Christian world there is a tradition of burying the dead in the soil and it does not bear dogmatic character. In early Christian times and later, during medieval times, the burning of the dead at open pyres resembled pagan rituals. To emphasize the difference between Christians and pagans, Carl the Great in the 8th century banned burning of the dead. Besides, according to Marija Djurić-Srejić, the function of this ban was to form stronger ties between Christians and the cult place – church and a cemetery next to it (Djurić-Srejić 1995, 85). Christianity influenced an interesting phenomenon in the Western European world in medieval times – on the one hand, the practice of burning the dead disappeared while on the other Roman-Catholics began burning people alive (Inquisition). Interest in cremation reappears in the second half of the 19th century due to the growing cities and lack of land for new graves.

Modern cremation

Incineration in a narrow sense represents the type of funeral that implies the burning of dead bodies. The term cremation describing this way of disposing of remains is linked with the cremation movement, which started in the 19th century and it will be discussed later. There are two types of burning – in the open air (pyre) and in special incinerators (crematory). After incineration, remains are usually placed in special containers (urns) and then handed to the deceased's relatives who dispose of them according to the government laws, customs and deceased's wish. Ashes can be treated in different ways (burying of the urn in a grave, placing it into columbarium or rosaries, scattering in nature - into the sea, under a tree, from a plane and so on) (Djurić-Srejić 1995, 101-102).

Cremation was allowed for the first in some protestant communities, with the logical explanation being that God can resurrect a handful of ashes as well as a handful of dust. Nevertheless, cremation is not allowed in all protestant communities (Cloud 2007). Erecting modern crematories helped to distinguish between Christian ritual and pagan open pyre. However, in general, it is necessary to distinguish between pagan incineration and modern cremation. Pagan incineration has a religious character, while modern cremation tends not to have it, stressing ecological and economical justifications for incineration (Djurić-Srejić 1995, 101).

Aleksandra Pavićević wrote in detail about the history of cremation in general, as well as about the development of the cremation idea and movement in Serbia (Pavićević 2006a, Pavićević 2006b, Pavićević 2007), so herein I do not intend to review that data. I would only mention basic facts regarding this problem in Serbian society, where, like in Greece, Orthodoxy is traditional religion. Present-day cremation idea started at International Congress of Medicine in Firenze, in 1869. Some intellectuals, especially in Germany, advocated for this idea even earlier (Pavićević 2006a, 290). The idea of cremation in Serbia appeared in the 19th century in works of Serbian doctor, poet and writer Jovan Jovanović Zmaj (Ibid 289-303). Doctor Vojislav Kujundžić founded in 1904 The Society for Cremation "Flame" ("Oganj"). Thirty years later he launched the journal with the same name, whose purpose was to promote cremation in Serbia (Pavićević 2006a, 289; Pavićević 2006b, 988; Pavićević 2007, 913). At that time intellectuals and wealthy citizens in Serbia supported the idea of cremation, but more as a matter of social status than real desire and ability to be cremated. Nevertheless,

several cremations of the dead from Serbia were performed in the first half of the 20th century and they were transported to German city of Gotha. On one side the Church was against cremation, while cremation supporters argued that cremation is separated both from religion and church (Pavićević 2006b, 991-993). The second half of the 20th century brought changes in the attitude toward religion and cremation became a part of atheistic philosophy (Pavićević 2006a, 299). The first crematorium in Belgrade was built in 1964 (Ibid 289-303). According to the research by Aleksandra Pavićević, from 1990s to present, “different individuals are being cremated, regardless of age, social or economic status, religious beliefs and possession of family graves. As one of the main motives for cremation appears the fear of body destruction” (Ibid 300-301).

The Roman-Catholic church used to be the biggest opponent of the cremation idea in the Western world. Cremation supporters explained that hostility by the fact that all cemeteries were in church's possession, so funerals and related Christian ceremonies generated income that church and clergy would have to give up if cremation would have been accepted. Forensic medicine was also against cremation because burning of the remains would destroy evidence of a potential crime (Pavićević 2006a, 292). In 1966 the Roman-Catholic church allowed priests to perform memorial services to those who would be cremated but not in the cremation hall. In the Orthodox Church, depending on local practices, memorial services are selectively permitted before cremation (Ibid 916). The strong opposition to cremation by the Greek Orthodox Church, influences implementation of government decisions and laws. However, there are exceptions to the rule, which will be discussed later.

Funerary practice in modern Greece

In modern Greece, in most cases (with exception of secular funerals), a funeral implies burial in soil followed by Orthodox religious service. Graves can be bought or more often rented for a period of three years. Marble tombstones are temporary. Orthodox Greeks customarily visit the grave every Saturday during the first three years. As mentioned before, the deceased are excavated after three years.

From the 1980s, the lack of graves in urban areas and stress that living relatives of the deceased suffer, led to stronger advocacy for crematories in Greece. Nevertheless, the first cremated individuals of Greek origin were emigrants i.e. people who died away from Greece, mostly artists.

Cremation became an issue for the Greek Orthodox Church in 1910, from the diaspora, when the Head of Greek Orthodox Church in Paris sought approval from the master church in Greece to give a memorial service before the cremation of Orthodox poet Ioannis Papadiamandopoulos (1856 Athens-1910 Paris), aka Jean Moreas. The semi-official stance of the Church was published at that time in the journal “Holy Alliance” („Ιερός Σύνδεσμος“) where it expressed a negative attitude toward cremation. Regarding the proposal by prefect of Attica, Dasius, to allow the building of a crematory in Athens, Metropolitan of the islands Syros and Tinos, Athanasius, published his thoughts that favored burial into the soil, in journal “Christian world” („Χριστιανικός Κόσμος“) on island Syros (Tsantilas 1999, 251).

The physicians' Association of Athens under its president M. Kozis publicly argued for the introduction of cremation. The First Court of Athens rejected this proposal in 1943 stating that cremation was opposed to Greek customs. The same proposal of this Association was rejected again in 1944. Members of the Physicians'

Association of Athens under president Papatheodorou founded “Scientific Society for studying various ways of treating the dead” which First Court of Athens endorsed in 1946. This was practically the first association advocating for cremation. (Alakiotis 2006, 26).

Greek composer and pianist Dimitris Mitropoulos (1896 Athens – 1960 Milan) built his career mostly in the USA. After his death and cremation in Milan in 1960, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece refused to perform a funeral service. This decision stirred the ecclesiastical circles as well as the whole Greek community. Eminent theologians’ attitude towards this was different from that of ecclesiastical dignitaries. They said that the choice of the manner of someone’s burial does not have a dogmatic character, but that of a local tradition. According to this, the church should not banish its believers who want to be cremated and do not want to offend the church by this (Alakiotis 2006, 26).

Maria Callas (christened Anna Maria Sofia Cecilia Kalogeropoulou) had a different treatment by the Church of Greece when it came to her funeral. The world famous Greek opera diva was born in 1923 in New York. She died in 1977 in Paris and she was cremated according to her own wish. The Orthodox Christian funeral service was also performed in the Greek Orthodox Church in Paris. In 1979 her ashes were scattered in the Aegean Sea according to her own bequest. This was performed by Dimitris Nianias who was the minister of culture of the Republic of Greece at the time (Alakiotis 2006, 25).

According to the information I got from Charula Chalkia, the president of the “Association of Friends of Cremation”, in 1984 they wrote a petition to the Municipality of Kalithea to ask for the opening of a crematorium. In February 1985 they published an article on cremation in “Mesimvrini” newspaper. In the same period Chalkia took part in radio broadcasts dedicated to this issue. There were also several newspaper articles on cremation. In the same year citizens of the Zografou municipality asked for a crematorium to be opened. Chalkia claimed that the greatest problem was that nobody in the government authorities could tell them who was in charge with the matter of crematoriums. In April 1986 they were recognized by the Athenian Court of the First Instance under the name “Association of Friends of Cremation”. This association has done a lot to promote the idea of cremation and took many initiatives in Greek society. They argued their idea stating that there are some ecological issues and problems of modern humanity.

In the same year another group of cremation supporters founded the association called “P.S.Y.K.N.”. The associations have close cooperation. They gather information which advocates for cremation on a scientific basis. In the period between 1986 and 1988 some of Athenian municipalities, like Kalithea, Agios Dimitrios, Zografou, argued in favor of cremation and asked the Ministry of Internal Affairs for help to build a crematorium. However, this initiative did not have any success.

According to the information from Charula Chalkia’s archives, in 1987 the newspaper “Ethnos” published an article on church services performed over the ashes of Alexander Iolas (real name Konstantinos Koutsoudis), a Greek gallerist and collector of contemporary works of art who died in 1987 in New York. In summer 1987 many people died in Athens from high temperatures and a lack of burial space was an urgent issue to be solved. The president of the Municipality of Athens, Miltiadis Evert, made an official appeal to the Holy Synod and the government asking for permission to

cremate the victims of this natural disaster pointing out the problem related to the lack of burial places. However, the church rejected the appeal (Alakiotis 2006, 27).

In 1987 another association of cremationists called “Odyssey” applied for flotation which was rejected by the Multi Member First Instance Civil Court of Athens. However, members of the association made a plea which was accepted in 1988. After they had won the lawsuit, they founded the “Odyssey” association. Its president was a well-known activist Niki Leondiou, the vice president was Ioannis Regkas and the general secretary was Giorgos Votsis, a journalist. They promoted the idea of cremation in various ways in the Greek community and argued in favor of solving this problem legally. At the same time, “The Greek Society of Supporters of Cremation” was founded. Newspapers, magazines, and the media informed the public about this idea (Alakiotis 2006, 27).

„Committee for the Foundation of a Crematorium in Greece for Citizens to whom their Religion Allows” was founded in 1997 in order to suggest to the Assembly the approval of a legal regulative which would give the opportunity for the opening of a crematorium in Greece – as stated in the name of the committee, for people to whom their religion allows (to be cremated). This committee consists of Greek citizens of foreign nationalities (non-Greek) and Greek lawyers who in 1998 and 2002 put forward the proposition to the Greek Assembly that cremation should be allowed. This committee has been a member of ICF (International Cremation Federation) since 2000. The committee maintains contacts with many crematoriums abroad and tries in every possible way to help living relatives and burial firms with the problems they might be facing about cremation procedures (Alakiotis 2006, 28-31). In 2001 the committee founded a non-profit organization called “The Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece” and one of its goals is to build a crematorium in Greece (Alakiotis 2006, 29). On December 15th 2002 there was a discussion in the Assembly about the possibility of cremation for people whose religious dogmas allow or insist on cremation. It is an interesting phenomenon that the proposition for cremation to the Greek Assembly has not been rejected by any government so far, but it has never been put into practice either (Alakiotis 2006, 32). Apart from this, it is interesting that atheists are not mentioned anywhere, but it is always discussed what different religions allow.

Contemporary Greece is a country where thousands of immigrants live. They came from countries where cremation is either allowed or obligatory in accordance with their religious customs. Sometimes, they want to be cremated after they die, irrespectively of the religious beliefs. Eleni Martsoukou claims that the fact that there is no legal frame for the permission to cremate in Greece represents the violation of Article 9 on human rights and freedom which was enacted in the Greek Assembly (Alakiotis 2006, 32).

Almost twenty years after the “Association of Friends of Cremation” was founded in March 2006 by the Greek Parliament, the law by which cremation is allowed to those whose religion allows it was enacted. However, so far nothing has been done to put the law into practice (Kolia 2006; Kroustalli, Dimitra, Katerina Sokou 2006; Pavićević 2006a, 299). The main obstacle is the Church of Greece which still opposes the opening of a crematorium.

Although seven years have passed since the law was enacted, those who wish to be cremated after they die cannot do this on the territory of Greece because there are no crematoriums. In the interview with the owner of a funeral firm Nicholaos Kiriakidis from Athens I found out that the bodies are taken by car to Sofia in Bulgaria to be

cremated. The price of this arrangement is 2300 euro. This price includes all expenses (papers, urns, taxes, etc.). The necessary papers include the statement from the deceased that it was his last wish or a liable statement of a relative from the first line of kindred that it was his last wish; then the death certificate (from a hospital or a doctor), ID of the deceased; certificate from the Registry of Deaths. Funeral Bureau translates the necessary papers, which is done at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, into the language of the country to which body of the deceased is being transported. Apart from this, the undertakers prepare the body of the deceased in an appropriate way and they place it in a coffin which is then put into a special metal coffin for transportation. Before the departure, the coffin is sealed by the competent service. One escort can be taken in the car. The journey lasts about ten hours, so everything can be done in a day. After cremation, the urn with the ashes is given to the family of the deceased and they are free to do whatever they want with it. It is also possible to perform cremation in some other countries, for example in Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, Serbia, but the price is a lot higher. For example, cremation in Germany costs 6000 euro because of the plane transport and overall higher costs of cremation. Some clients prefer the more expensive option because it is more prestigious. Some wealthy families choose to send off their deceased from a crematorium in Western Europe, for example in Germany, in order to show their economic status to the community.

However, this is not always the case. The Mayor of Thessaloniki, Ioanis Boutaris, cremated his wife Athina Michail in Bulgaria respecting her bequest (Alakiotis 2006, 30; Milapidis 2012). Boutaris was forced to deal with, in his own words “the persistent refusal of the Church to perform a funeral rite after his wife’s body had been burnt”. He wondered why the Church of Greece opposed cremation, although according to the law from 2006 Greek citizens had the right to choose it. Apart from this, he was surprised when he found out that the Church of Bulgaria performs funeral services for those who are to be cremated too (“Cremation now in Greece, 700 euro“ 2008). It needs to be pointed out that the funeral rite is performed for those who are to be cremated, not for the already cremated ones. The funeral rite is performed for a deceased person, not for their ashes.

The Church of Greece in its statement on cremation in 2010 pointed out that inhumation is the only recognized way of burial for Orthodox Christians. The church, however, does not oppose the burning of the dead who belong to other denominations (Milapidis 2012). This is in theory, but in practice we come to a paradoxical situation where non-Orthodox people cannot perform their rite, i.e. cremation.

According to Andonis Alakiotis, one can turn to the “Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece” to perform cremation of bones after they had been exhumed, or of those that can no longer stay in an ossuary because their relatives can no longer pay for it. Father Nenad Mihajlovic, a priest of a Serbian descent, who lives and works in Athens, claims that there were cases when persons of Serbian nationality were buried in Greece, and then they were exhumed and taken to a cemetery in Serbia.

In November 2011 the steering committee of the Municipality of Markopoulos (Attica) unanimously voted for the permission to build a crematorium on the territory of this municipality. Nikos Milapidis claimed that the building of the Centre for Deflagration of the Dead would not only make cremation possible, but the municipality could also make some profit. Some estimate that the building of a crematorium would bring an income of 300-500 thousand euro per year (Milapidis 2012). However, three months later, in February 2012, the steering committee reversed the decision they had

voted unanimously. The citizens of the municipality thought that the building of a crematorium would worsen the living conditions. Environmental protection experts claimed that the burning of the dead who had dental fillings would increase the pollution of atmosphere above the limits. Most Orthodox Christians were revolted. Metropolitan Mesogeios Nicholaos published a pamphlet on December 11th 2011 in which he wrote about the necessity to cherish the Church tradition and that they would not perform a funeral rite for those believers who chose cremation (Milapidis 2012; Trivoli 2012).

Why do people want to be cremated?

The reasons why people in Greece choose to be cremated nowadays are either religious (belonging to certain religions, especially Buddhism) or because they are emigrants and they want their body to be taken to the homeland (from abroad to Greece or from Greece to some other country) or – mostly – because they do not want their children to be exposed to stress when it comes to excavations and secondary burials.

The international Buddhist school “Diamond Way Karma Kagyu” (The daimond way to Budism 2012) seated in Athens addressed the Greek minister of internal affairs Skandalidis regarding the cremation of the dead. The letter said that by the decision number A3/183-3/5/2001 made by the Ministry of Education and Religion it is allowed to found a Buddhist community home. In the Buddhist religious tradition cremation represents the basic part of a funeral ritual. For this reason the community asked for a place for cremation in Greece as soon as possible (The Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece 2012). The Australian Embassy in Greece contacted and supported the Committee for the Foundation of a Crematorium in Greece for Citizens that their Religion Allows. The letter said that a lot of Australian citizens die every year in Greece. Apart from the emotional stress, their family members are additionally exposed to stress because of large expenditures for body transportation to Australia since that there are no crematoriums in Greece (The Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece 2012). On 20 January 1998 the German-speaking Evangelical Church in Greece (Salonika parish) also contacted and supported the committee. The letter said that in Evangelical Church the manner of burial is a personal matter and that their believers would benefit from the building of a crematorium (The Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece 2012).

Greek activists for cremation have websites and blogs on the Internet. In their texts they point out the economic advantages of this kind of burial: “cremation would mean the end of purchasing or renting graves, high prices of grave ledgers, memorials for the repose of the soul, the distressing experience of excavation, the end of economic and emotional costs for the relatives” (“Cremation in Athens too“ 2011). The press pointed out that apart from the economic issue (higher costs of body transportation to crematoriums abroad) the lack of the Centre for the Burning of the Dead in the country means the transgression of some articles of the Constitution and the international law of human rights (“Cremation in Salonika“ 2011).

Very often people want to be cremated to protect their family from the emotional stress of excavation of their un-decayed body: “I want to spare my children as much as possible. I do not want priests, singers, gravediggers, grave ledger constructors, etc. to make some kind of a party over my dead body. I am an organ donor. But, that is another story...” (“Cremation in Athens too“ 2011).

In the comments part under the text of Nikos Milapidis, the reader Maria Souli wrote about her distressing testimony of the excavation of her father's body three years after his burial: "November 27th 2012 at 12:59. Dear Mr Milapidis, today the necessary excavation of my father at the Third graveyard of Nikea took place under inappropriate and inhuman conditions. After they had dug out my father's 'un-decayed' body, which happens very often at this graveyard because of the lack of burial places, they threw him on the ground and decapitated. Then, they took off his clothes and put what was left of him, on a construction cart... We wandered around for more than an hour to find another place to 'put' him into; you know, those small areas where they put the 'un-decayed'. However, deceased do not decompose even a year after they had been excavated. I wonder why only three years after my father's death, I have to bury him again like some kind of an animal!! To watch his dead body out of which cockroaches come out and crawl over my feet... Why does this graveyard still work when everybody knows about this horrible problem concerning overcrowding? Perhaps, if that happened, many firms' benefit (flower shops, grave ledgers, pubs, etc.) would have to be reexamined? What I witnessed today was the desecration of the dead, not exhumation. The culture of a society is, among other things, valuated by its attitude towards the dead..." (Milapidis 2012).

Instead of a conclusion

From everything above, we can conclude that there is a series of inconsistencies on different levels regarding burials in Greece nowadays. Firstly, there is the controversial attitude of the Church of Greece towards the remains, cremation and people of other denominations and in Greece. As if it is forgotten that there are non-Orthodox citizens living in Greece, as well as Orthodox ones who may want to be cremated. People who fight for the free choice of burial mode are not necessary atheists. Some of them are Orthodox Christians, others belong to other Christian denominations, some belong to other religions and some of them are atheists and agnostics.

However, as mentioned, Orthodox Christianity is the official denomination in Greece with a great social influence. This has been an obstacle for the building of a crematorium. The Orthodox Church does not have a dogma of burial in the ground. It came as a consequence of long lasting practice, through which it became the custom. Inhumation is recommended due to respect of the body and due to idea that the deceased should wait for the general Resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ in peace.

In practice everything is quite the opposite. As we have seen, in urban centers of Greece exhumations of the dead are preformed after a very short period. The following treatment (tearing the remains apart or throwing them in a common pit) is in contrast with the principle of respect for both the dead and the living who are exposed to the emotional shock. Apart from this, according to the Orthodox belief the dead bodies of Christians are potential holy relics. The financial position of the deceased is crucial because there is a chance that the potential holy relics remain only if there is enough money to pay for the ossuary. Those for whom the ossuary is not paid (or if the payments stop after several years because those who were paying them also died) are buried in a *honeftiri* and destroyed with chemicals. So, the remains are destroyed anyway, it's just that destruction is postponed depending on the payments.

Apart from this, one wonders why aren't new graveyards opened or why aren't citizens encouraged to be buried in places where they came from (on islands, villages throughout the country)? The answer to my first question was that "there is not enough space for the opening of the new graveyards", and the answer to the second one was that there is important tradition of visiting graves, particularly during three years after the burial. Beside this, the transportation to one's place of birth also costs too much. People apparently refer to the *tradition of Ancient Greece* whether they are for or against cremation. Everyone mentions those historic periods which are convenient to corroborate their tendencies.

The chain included in funeral services (municipality, church, undertakers, grave ledgers' manufacturers, florists, etc.) benefits from the tradition. If there were only one way of funeral – either inhumation or cremation, that would reduce profit to a large degree. When it comes to burials in Greece nowadays, it can be ascertained that both tradition and religion are used to increase profit.

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Проблеми сахрањивања у савременој Грчкој: између обичаја, закона и економије

У фокусу интересовања овог рада налази се проблематика сложеног односа религије и локалне традиције са једне стране и потреба савременог друштва, државних закона и миграција са друге стране, на примеру сахрањивања у савременој Грчкој. Пренасељеност у великим урбаним центрима, посебно у атинским општинама има за

Кључне речи: сахрана, кремација, хоневтири, Грчка, Атина, емигранти, традиција, религија, Црква.

последицу недостатка простора за традиционално дугорочније сахрањивање инхумацијом. Прибегава се есхумацији где су чланови породице приморани да се након три до пет година суоче са посмртним (често нераспаднутим) остацима својих ближњих. Поставља се питање зашто се не прибегава кремацији иако постоје крематистичка удружења заинтересованих грађана. Иако је грчки парламент 2006. године изгласао дозволу за изградњу и пуштање у рад крематоријума, Грчка је још увек једина земља чланица Европске уније која нема крематоријум. Ово се може објаснити чињеницом да је у Грчкој православно хришћанство државна религија са јаким друштвеним утицајем, који се, између осталог, одражава и на успорено решавање проблема кремирања посмртних остатака, чак и за иноверне и атеисте. Покојници се превозе у најјефтиније крематоријуме у Бугарској или ређе у неке „престижније“ у западноевропским државама.