

Death and Afterlife in Greece

The Greeks believed that at the moment of death the *psyche*, or spirit of the dead, left the body as a little breath or puff of wind. It was then accompanied to the boundaries of the **Underworld (or Hades)** by Hermes, the Messenger of the Gods. The God of the Underworld was Hades, for whom the underworld was named.

The subterranean river **Styx**, the boundary of Hades, must be crossed by boat and **Charon** was the ferryman of the dead. Upon receiving payment of his fee, he carried the spirit of the dead person or “**shade**” across the Styx which ran around the perimeter of Hades **seven times**. **Cerberus**, the three-headed dog, guarded the entrance to the underworld and prevented anyone from returning to the world of the living.

According to legends, Hades had two additional parts: **Tartaros**, a hell below Hades where evil people were sent for punishment, and **Elysium**, located at the western end of the earth and inhabited by those greatly favored by Zeus. Thus the concept of punishment and reward for deceased mortals was introduced.

Hades was not a happy place. It was crowded by countless drifting groups of shadowy sad figures – the shades of those who had died. The ghost of the great hero Achilles told Odysseus that “he would rather be a poor serf on earth than lord of all the dead in the Underworld.” (*Odyssey*, 11.489-91)

And immortality for the Greeks? Immortality lay in the continued remembrance of the dead by the living. From depictions on white-ground lekythoi, we know that the women of classical Athens made regular visits to the graves with offerings that included small cakes and libations.

Prepared for the SBMA Docent Council by Gabriella Schooley, April 27, 2006

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