Death and Dying in Antiquity

Instructor: Prof. Mira Balberg
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Office: H&SS 6073
Office Hours: TTh 10.30-11.30

Class meeting time and place: TTh 2-3.20, Peterson 104

Description and goals

Death is perhaps the most universal of all human experiences, and the process of coming to terms with our own death and coping with the death of others stands at the center of much of religion, philosophy, and culture since time immemorial. This course offers an exploration of central myths, beliefs, practices, questions, fears, and hopes associated with death in antiquity, and ranges across different times and places, from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia through Greece and Rome to early Judaism and Christianity. The purpose of this course is to get acquainted with some of the most interesting and influential ideas on death in the history of human civilization while developing a historical and contextual perspective on those ideas.

Content warning: *Some of the materials in this class could potentially be disturbing or emotionally taxing. If you are currently dealing with acute grief or personal crisis, you may want to hold off on taking this class. If at any point during the quarter you feel vexed by the materials or find yourself in turmoil around the themes of the class, please contact me immediately.*

Requirements and evaluation

Materials:

- Please purchase the **course reader** from the bookstore and bring it *to every class*.
- In addition, please purchase a copy of Euripides' play ***Alcestis*** (trans. William Arrowsmith)

Preparation and attendance:

This class is fundamentally a conversation: a conversation amongst ourselves and a conversation between us and the texts we will be reading. Therefore, the class crucially depends on your preparation: you are asked to read the texts assigned for every class so as to be thoroughly ready to engage in conversation about them in class and to make a substantial contribution to the discussion. You are also asked not to use any electronic devices in the classroom, including laptops, to ensure minimum distractions.

Class PowerPoint presentations will be posted on TritonEd after each class and will be available to you throughout the quarter. However, under no circumstances are you allowed to post those presentations anywhere or distribute them to people who are not enrolled in the course – this is a violation of intellectual property laws.

Evaluation:

You will be evaluated based on three written assignments and five quizzes.

Quizzes. Each quiz will consist of two multiple-choice questions: one about material studied in the previous class and one about the reading for the present class. There will be six quizzes in the quarter (see syllabus for dates), but only the best five will count toward your final grade.

Assignments. Elaborate guidelines for the assignments will be given in due time. Please note that assignments are not accepted after the deadline, except in a case of family or medical emergency. Also, Please remain aware that every written work you submit must be authored by you and you only, and any suspicion that this is not the case will lead to further investigation.

The final grade will be calculated in the following way:

Assignment	**% of the grade**	**Length**
Alcestis (due week 4)	15%	3 pages
Josephus (due week 6)	30%	4-6 pages
Perpetua (due finals week)	40%	6-7 pages
Quizzes (weeks 3,5,7,8,9,10)	15% (3% each – best 5 out of 6)	---

Topics and assigned readings for each class

Week I

1. *Introduction: Does death have a history? (T 4/2)*

2. *Approaching the cultural history of death: Ancient Egypt (Th 4/4)*
   Readings: Excerpt from Diodorus Sicilus, *The Library of History*; Spell 125 from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*

Week II

3. *Mortals and immortals: The Ancient Near East (T 4/9)*
   Reading: Excerpt from the Epic of Gilgamesh

4. *The underworld and the life of the dead: The ancient Near East (Th 4/11)*
   Reading: *Innana's Descent to the Underworld*
   Assignment 1 given

Week III

Tuesday 4/16: No Class

5. *Ancient Greece: A beautiful death (Th 4/18)*
   Reading: *The Iliad*, books 22, 24 **(Quiz)**

Week IV

Assignment 1 (Alcestis) due by Monday 4/22 at 10 pm

6. *Ancient Greece: perceptions of death (T 4/23)*

7. *A Philosophical death: the story of the soul (Th 4/25)*
Reading: Plato, *Phaedo* (beginning-69e, 114d-end); Excerpt from Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book 3

Week V

8. *Living and dying with Roman honor (T 4/30)*
Reading: Livy, *The History of Rome* II. 12-13; Seneca, letters 24, 70, 82 **(Quiz)**
Assignment 2 given

9. *Dying as a woman in ancient Rome (Th 5/2)*
Livy, *The History of Rome* I. 57-60; Pliny, Letter 16
**Content warning: the reading from Livy contains an elaborate account of rape.*

Week VI

Assignment 2 (Josephus) due by Monday 5/6 at 10 pm

10. *Dying in the Arena: gladiators and condemned criminals (T 5/7)*

11. *Human sacrifice – myth or reality? (Th 5/9)*
Reading: Genesis 22 (the sacrifice of Isaac) and Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities 1.13*; Judges 11 (Jephthah's daughter) and *Biblical Antiquities* 40

Week VII

12. *Dying for the law (T 5/14)*
Reading: Daniel 3; 2 Maccabees 6-7 **(Quiz)**

13. The death and resurrection of Jesus *(Th 5/16)*
Reading: Mark 14-16; Luke 22-24; John 16-21 [**readings posted on TritonEd**]

Week VIII

14. *The beginnings of Christian martyrdom (T 5/21)*
Reading: Excerpts from the letter of Ignatius; the Martyrdom of Polycarp

15. *Martyrdom and Gender (Th 5/23)*
Reading: The Acts of Paul and Thecla **(Quiz)**
Assignment 3 given

Week IX

16. *Narratives of Jewish martyrdom (T 5/28)*
Reading: selected texts from the Babylonian Talmud; Midrash *Ele Ezkera*

17. *Dying Christian beyond martyrdom (Th 5/30)* **(Quiz)**
Reading: Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*

Week X

18. *The resurrection and the cult of the saints (T 6/5)*
Reading: Augustine, *City of God* 22.8 **(Quiz)**

19. *The end of death? (Th 6/7)*
Reading: Yuval N. Harari, "The Last Days of Death" **(Link on TritonED)**

http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/essay/the-last-days-of-death

Watch: Becoming immortal - VPRO documentary – 2018 **(Link on TritonED)**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KscnT6FxMIQ

Assignment 3 (Perpetua) due Tuesday 12/6 by 2 pm