

Coming Back to Life in the Ancient Mediterranean: An Introduction

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Abstract:

The collected essays in this volume, which have their genesis in a 2014 colloquium held at McGill University and Concordia University, examine the *coming back to life* thematic in a variety of ancient Mediterranean contexts. Our interests lie in the exploration of how antique communities configured, tested, and actualised the boundaries between *past and present*, *mortality and immortality*, *death and life*. In this introductory essay we define our problematic, outline the scope of analysis, and survey the major themes and contributions of each essay.

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Coming Back to Life in the Ancient Mediterranean: An Introduction

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The permanence and profundity of death touches human beings across cultures and times. To the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean, the lines between death and life were neither fixed nor finite. For many, death was a passageway into a new and uncertain existence. The dead were not so much extinguished as understood to be elsewhere, and some even held that the deceased continued to exercise agency among the living. Others were more sceptical, insisting that beliefs in ghosts and afterlives are nothing more than popular superstitions. Yet even here, notions of *coming back to life* provided a framework in which to conceptualise the ongoing social, political, and cultural influence of the past. To varying degrees, notions of *coming back to life* function less as theological convictions and more as discursive tropes that allow the living to grapple with that which is lost. Whether through mnemonic commemoration, performative incantation, or conceptual recognition, that which was past could *come back to life* in a variety of ways in the ancient Mediterranean.

The collected essays in this volume, which have their genesis in a 2014 colloquium held in Montreal, Quebec,¹ examine the *coming*

¹ [“Coming Back to Life: Performance, Memory, and Cognition in the Ancient Mediterranean.”](#) An international scholarly colloquium held at McGill University and Concordia University, 8–11 May 2014.

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back to life thematic within a variety of ancient Mediterranean contexts. Our interests lie in the exploration of how antique communities configured, tested, and actualised the boundaries between *past and present*, *mortality and immortality*, *death and life*. Certainly ancient Jewish and Christian notions of the resurrection of the dead—and particularly, Christian beliefs in the resurrection of Jesus—stand as prime examples of the *coming back to life* thematic. But even here, where the return to life reverses death through the reviving and often transforming of the deceased, there exists a much larger set of assumptions regarding the ontology of *past and present*, *mortality and immortality*, *death and life*: namely, convictions of the potential porosity between distinct modes of existence. On this point, we find that ancient Judeans and Christ-devotees were not alone in negotiating the boundaries between the living and the dead. As the essays in this volume explore, the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean experimented widely with various understandings of death's *permeability*.

For many, the passage from life to death required a process of ritual transference, and failure to do so could result in the restlessness of the dead. The Roman magistrate Pliny the Younger ([Ep. 7.27](#)), for example, recounts the story of an Athenian house in which the remains of a certain man had been carelessly buried. From time to time, the man's ghost would perpetually haunt subsequent residents of the house until his body had been exhumed and properly laid to rest (Hope 2000). In this instance, the perception of permeability extends across several modes of existence: the decaying bones, the disembodied restless spirit, and even the petrified, insomnia-ridden residents. Indeed, Pliny goes on to note that, even during the daylight hours, when the phantom was at bay, “the remembrance of it made such a strong impression upon their imaginations that it still seemed before their eyes, and their terror remained” (trans. Melmoth and Hutchinson 1915). In this account, for these Athenians, the lines between life and death are, in various ways, quite porous.

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Others negotiated this permeability by engaging in popular practices such as the offering of meals at tombs as a way of sustaining the deceased in the afterlife. Such practices are described in the writings of the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata, who mocks the activities of his contemporaries; thus Charon asks:

Why is it, then, that those people [= the living] are putting garlands on the stones and anointing them with perfumes? There are others also who have built pyres in front of the mounds and have dug trenches, and now they are burning up those fine dinners and pouring wine and mead, as far as one may judge, into the ditches.

To which Hermes replies:

I don't know what good these things are to men in Hades, ferryman; they are convinced, however, that the souls, allowed to come up from below, get their dinner as best they may by flitting about the smoke and steam and drink the mead out of the trench. (Lucian, *Char.* 22; trans. Harmon, Kilburn, and MacLeod, 1913–1967)

While Lucian is sceptical of such efforts (Davies 1999, 131–35),² for those who mourn, though the dead are gone, practices like these function as mechanisms by which the deceased are able to *come back to life* within the perceptions of the living.

The satirical flavour of Lucian's account highlights that not all held beliefs in an afterlife. Nonetheless, notions of *coming back to life* provided a framework within which many conceptualised phenomena such as social structures, cultural institutions, ritual behaviours, and even political ideologies. The burial practices of the

² Indeed, Charon's reply to Hermes is telling: "What, *they* eat and drink, when their skulls are dry as tinder? . . . I should be in a fine predicament, Hermes, and should have no end of trouble if I were obliged not only to bring them down but to bring them up to drink! What folly, the idiots! They do not know what an impassible frontier divides the world of the dead from the world of the living" (emphasis original).

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Roman aristocracy are particularly noteworthy, even if they represent an ideal of the elite. Here, funeral processions functioned as pageants of Roman memory; wearing ancestor masks that had been fashioned and collected through a given family's history, actors played the role of the deceased and thus brought the familial and political pasts *back to life* in a single performance (Flower 1996).

The examples just cited, which focus more on boundary negotiation between the living and the dead than on the assertion of the deceased's return, naturally raise the question, how strictly should one consider the theme of *coming back to life*? Are we to limit our analyses to instances of revivification, or might we also include accounts of apotheosis, immortalisation, heavenly transposition, mnemonic commemoration, and even cultural resurgence? In the stories of the ancient Mediterranean, figures such as Memnon, Heracles, Enoch, and at times even Moses and Jesus are variously thought to experience elevation to new forms of (divinised) life, either after having first experienced death or perhaps skipping death altogether. Some might suggest these accounts do not represent *coming back to life* (strictly speaking), for the figures in question do not return to the terrestrial, embodied land of the living but instead are transformed into various expressions of divinity. Yet, as Katharina Waldner (this volume) rightly notes, such accounts immediately cast doubt on the very categories that we moderns take as fixed and impermeable, categories such as *human* and *god*, *heaven* and *earth*, *life* and *death*, and *past*, *present*, and *future*. What we find spread across the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean are not neat partitions or strict categorical binaries, but rather imaginative constructions that explore and test the boundaries of *past and present*, *mortality and immortality*, *death and life*. Indeed, when looking for touch points between ancient Mediterranean cultures, permeability and the potential of transformation between cosmological, anthropological, and theological categories finds widespread resonance (Tappenden 2015). When configured more broadly, notions of *coming back to life* relate not only to the revivification of human subjects but also—and more pervasively—to

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ideals of heavenly and somatic transformation, and further to patterns of re-emergence within the social, cultural, and/or political spheres.

The focus of this volume, then, is upon the various ways that *past and present, mortality and immortality, life and death* interlace each other in the ancient Mediterranean. We are interested in how antique peoples negotiate and explore the *porosity* or *permeability* that might exist between that which is gone and that which remains. At the opening of her excellent study, *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (1999), Sarah Iles Johnston configures this permeability as a “paradox”:

[The] person who once ate and drank and laughed with the rest of us is gone, [and yet] she continues to inhabit the world of those who knew her. Because the dead remain part of our mental and emotional lives long after they cease to dwell beside us physically, it is easy to assume that they are simply carrying on their existence elsewhere and might occasionally come back to visit us. From this assumption arise a variety of hopes and fears. (Johnston 1999, viii)

In varying ways, the papers in this volume explore the hopes and fears of ancient Mediterranean peoples and communities. In doing so, notions of *coming back to life* are seen to touch on a wide array of topics and human experiences.

A launching point for our collective efforts in this volume is the conviction that the cultural ecosystem of the ancient Mediterranean is one of much exchange and interpenetration. In large part, this ecosystem is facilitated by the geography itself; as Angelos Chaniotis (2005, 148) notes: “the Mediterranean Sea has more often been a facilitator of communication than a barrier, and communication contributes to the wide diffusion not only of flora, fauna, and artifacts, but also of culture.” Though much of the first three centuries CE are usually regarded as a time of relative stability (for example, the *Pax Romana* of the first and second centuries), a pervasive undercurrent of cultural flux permeates the social fabric of

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the Mediterranean. The process of Romanisation from the first century BCE onward—what Craige Champion (2004, 214–77) describes as a procedure of cultural assimilation, hybridisation, and resistance—created an environment of cultural intermixing and cross-pollination that touched all areas of social life and fostered rich interchanges of ideas. It is within such a context that notions of *coming back to life* are adapted, invented, and experimented with by antique peoples. While many of the contributions in this volume focus on the literature of early Christ-devotees, the scope of the volume is sufficiently broad to place early Christian resurrection ideals within a larger, trans-Mediterranean framework of *coming back to life* discourses, beliefs, and practices. Given the scope and diversity of the ancient evidence, the contributors explore a wide breadth of antique writings and materials, centring largely on the first through third centuries CE, but touching also on classical Greek mythology, the waning years of republican Rome, and even fourth/fifth century monasticism in Egypt.

Our aim is to treat ancient Mediterranean religions—including expressions of early Christ worship—as a whole, thus highlighting the mutuality and exchanges that happen between distinct cultural expressions. As a field of academic inquiry, the study of comparative antique religions is still in its infancy (Spaeth 2013b). To date, much work has been done on the localized and cultural nature of ancient religions (Johnston 2004a, x), yet the more difficult task of exploring cultural intermixing and sharing is still relatively young. Standard reference works such as those by Barbette Spaeth (2013a) and Sarah Iles Johnston (2004b, 2007) begin with chapters that take a more localised approach (e.g., religion in Rome, religion in Greece, early Christianity, ancient Judaism, and the like), and then transition into topical surveys that explore religious intersections.³ No clear

³ So Spaeth (2013a) and Johnston (2004b, 2007); notably, and more recently, Orlin (2016) is organised more topically than geographically, and contributors were instructed “to explore—where possible—both commonalities among the different religious traditions and the difference between them” (xviii).

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definition has yet been put forward regarding what constitutes “ancient Mediterranean religion,” though Fritz Graf (2004, 14) concludes his essay, “What is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?”, by insisting:

I have regarded the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world as being in constant contact with each other—a contact that, similar to that of languages in contact, resulted both in assimilation and in dissimilation. I have not looked for specific characteristics of “the” religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, beyond their being in almost constant contact; in fact, this, to me, seems their main characteristic.

For Graf, this phenomenon of constant sharing, interpenetration, and definition vis-à-vis the other provides the sinew of study when considering ancient Mediterranean religion as a whole. Accordingly, the move toward examining what Chaniotis (2005, 143) calls “continuities, survivals, and similarities” between various religious groups necessitates a focus upon specific touchstones that find resonance within various religious expressions. By orienting our efforts around notions of *coming back to life*, this volume builds upon and contributes to the burgeoning field of comparative ancient religions by adding thematic focus that draws on the interdisciplinary depth and breadth of the volume’s contributors.

As noted above, the roots of this volume are in a 2014 colloquium held in Montreal. In preparation for that meeting, participants were invited to consider the theme of *coming back to life* in light of three analytical categories: performance, memory, and cognition. What we recognized then, and still see now, is that the complexity of the phenomenon of death’s *permeability* points to a matrix in which both the living and the dead have certain performative, mnemonic, and/or cognitive abilities that, in various ways, enable revivification. For example, the conviction that the dead sustain consciousness presumes the interlacing of cognition and memory such that the living are perpetually reminded of the restless dead’s ongoing capacity for communication and awareness.

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Similarly, the performative and mnemonic dimensions of death rites enable the deceased's tangible presence among the living through ritualized activities.

After the 2014 meeting, however, it became apparent (as is often the case) that more is at work in antique notions of *coming back to life* than we expected. In addition to the categories of performance, memory, and cognition, several contributors found issues of grief and mourning, genre and narrative structures, gender norms and ideals, and social structures and rituals to be just as germane. The thematic of *coming back to life* proved as pervasive as we suspected, finding expression not only in theological convictions but also in societal values, cultural frames, and structures of power and social expectation. Ultimately, this indicates that ancient ideas of *coming back to life* were not geographically, ethnically, or traditionally localised; instead, the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean experimented variously with notions of revivification and re-emergence. The diversity of the ancient evidence necessitates scholarly collaboration, and the breadth of contributors to this volume reflects the interdisciplinarity required to navigate the sea of cultural assimilation, hybridisation, and resistance noted above. Among this volume's contributors are scholars working in fields such as classics, ancient Judaism, early Christianity, and ancient Mediterranean religions, all of which employ an array of textual analyses and theoretical sophistication.

Our exploration of this thematic opens with Sarah Iles Johnston's paper, "Many (Un)Happy Returns: Ancient Greek Concepts of a Return from Death and their Later Counterparts." This contribution originally served as the keynote address from the 2014 colloquium, the video from which is also included in the HTML edition of this volume.⁴ Johnston's paper begins by cataloguing the revenants of classical Greek mythology, after which she examines some contemporary Western notions of *coming back to life* and finally links the two poles together with a discussion of the impacts of

⁴ The video can be accessed at <http://comingbacktolife.mcgill.ca>.

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Christian theology upon the Western imagination. Given the breadth and scope of her analysis, Johnston sets our thematic within a broader cultural context that spans two millennia.

The volume is structured into four sections, each of which includes clusters of papers that share similar thematic engagement with the *coming back to life* trope. In section one, Valerie Hope, Angela Standhartinger, and Daphna Arbel each address issues of memory and mourning in relation to the revivification of the dead. Hope examines Cicero's loss of his daughter, Tullia, in February 45 BCE; exploring the cultural expectations and dynamics that surround the expression of grief in late republican Rome, she concludes (p. 60):

Neither the dead nor the bereaved were simply forgotten or ignored, but reintegrated into new social roles. The dead could not come back to life (in a literal sense), but were given new spaces (in memory structures, conversation, epitaphs, images etc.) in the continuing lives of those that survived them.

In their own ways, both Standhartinger and Arbel explore these "new social roles" in relation to women's laments. Standhartinger focuses specifically on the context of funerary banquets, further pushing the thesis that the voice and actions of Jesus were dramatised in the meal context. As Standhartinger demonstrates, this was likely performed by women who actualised the divine drama, thus enabling the speaker Jesus to *come back to life*. Arbel moves in a different direction, focusing instead on the presentation of Eve at Adam's death in the [Greek Life of Adam and Eve \(GLAE\) 31-42](#). In this curious section, the GLAE avoids traditions of Eve's liability in Adam's death. Instead, together with the angels, Eve is deemed worthy and able to solicit God's mercy and to influence divine judgment, thus enacting Adam's safe transition to the afterlife and his preparation for (future) resurrection.

Section two considers the interrelated themes of how antique peoples conceptualise the return to life, and further how those concepts are substantiated within communal practices. Roger Beck

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considers the archaeological remains of the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres at Ostia. He argues that the very design of the mithraeum—which is a microcosm of the universe—functions as an instrument for getting initiates down from heaven and back out again. Accordingly, Beck’s analysis contributes to the longstanding body of scholarship that links death and *coming back to life* to cosmological descent and ascent (Bousset 1901; Segal 1980). Troels Engberg-Pedersen compares Jesus’s raising of Lazarus in John 11–12 with certain aspects of Stoic philosophy, focusing specifically on notions of the cognitive λόγος and the physical πνεῦμα. He concludes that, if we can in fact understand the Johannine notion of radical transformation from death to life within a unified cosmological framework along Stoic lines, then there is in fact a kind of porosity between death and life; it is a porosity that is generated by a power that is physical and directly active in the world, though perhaps more as part of the world in Stoicism than in John. Flowing from both Beck and Engberg-Pedersen, Frederick Tappenden draws on the themes of heavenly ascent and material cosmology to examine the dynamic interplay of *life in/through death* in the writings of Paul and some of his early interpreters. He demonstrates that Paul upholds an intricate balance between spatial concepts, correlating UP/NEAR/IN vis-à-vis DOWN/FAR/OUT in such a way as to envision death and life as mutually affecting one another in the material coordinates of the human body. What Paul holds in conceptual tension, however, his later interpreters tend to parse out and prioritise, thus resulting in a diversity of Pauline resurrection ideals. Hugo Lundhaug also explores variety in early Christian resurrection beliefs as articulated in the Origenist controversy of the late-fourth/early-fifth centuries. Analysing a selection of Egyptian monastic writings, he explores how these texts employ similar—even the same—terms and categories, though ultimately they reflect different—at times clashing—cognitive models. While words and phrases were being redefined, what mattered to the contestants was not just the phrases used, but also the concepts through which they were understood. In the end, Lundhaug demonstrates how notions

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of resurrection conformed to one's preferred cognitive model, thus producing very different interpretations of the same basic set of terms and metaphors.

The papers in section three explore the ways in which notions of *coming back to life* shape the identities of early Christ-devotee communities. Carly Daniel-Hughes's paper trades on similar topics to those of Engberg-Pedersen, Tappenden, and Lundhaug, though her focus is upon Tertullian's four treatises on marriage. She demonstrates that Tertullian's writings illuminate how speculation about the resurrected body could be implicated in early Christian views of social and communal life, both with a vision toward communal boundary definition and attempts at self-legitimation, and also with implications for intra-communal Christian debates about social and sexual practices, gender roles, and marital and familial arrangements. Working in a different sector of early Christian writings, David Eastman examines how the rhetoric of resurrection served to establish apostolic legitimacy. What separated Jesus from other teachers and would-be messiahs and affirmed his identity as unique was his resurrection, for this was the ultimate stamp of divine approval. Examining some of the apocryphal Acts, Eastman demonstrates this same status being applied to the apostles Paul and Peter, while their rival Simon Magus fails to prove himself through the same means. In the end, the final evidence of divinely-sanctioned legitimacy was not simply living well or dying well, but also *coming back to life*. The theme of following Jesus to one's death also permeates the papers of both Stéphanie Machabée and Eliza Rosenberg. Machabée notes that while many martyrologies portray women as rejecting biological motherhood in order to achieve salvation, a text such as the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons* deemed the language of birthing and motherhood to be useful in framing the experiences of persecuted Christians. For Machabée, though the rhetoric of birth, abortion, and rebirth creates a stark contrast between the experiences of Christian confessors and deniers, she goes on to demonstrate also that such language creates rhetorical space by which denying or lapsed Christians can *come*

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back to life upon a proper act of confession. Finally, working with the Apocalypse of John, Rosenberg charts the thematic correlations between ancient funerals and weddings—the trope of the so-called *blood wedding*. Interestingly, however, the martyr figures who receive resurrection at Revelation’s climax are restored not to the status of honourable masculinity, but rather to the status of the subordinate bride of the lamb. Accordingly, Rosenberg’s exploration of nuptial and funerary imagery contributes to scholarly discussions of gender transformations within the apocalypse more broadly (cf. Moore 1995; Frilingos 2003).

The volume concludes in section four with an exploration of the *coming back to life* thematic within the context of narrative and mythological representations. In many ways, the papers in this section tie in closely with Johnston’s contribution earlier in the volume. Katharina Waldner examines the figure of Hippolytus. She traces, from archaic Greece through imperial Rome, both the expressions of his hero cult and the various stories told about his gruesome death and *coming back to life*. Waldner demonstrates the various ways that such retellings facilitated the negotiation of boundaries between life and death, mortality and immortality, and hero, human being, and god, particularly with respect to political, cultural, aesthetic, and existential arenas. Jeffrey Keiser continues on the theme of Greek hero cult, specifically the mythological topos of theomachy (or “god fighting”). His point of departure is Paul’s use of the term κέντρον; through a close comparison with other examples of theomachy in Greek, Roman, and Jewish writings, Keiser shows that Paul taunts the personified figure of Death for failing to defeat Christ, the god-fighter ([1 Cor 15:54–57](#)). Far from providing a mere rhetorical flourish for 1 Cor 15, Paul’s taunt illustrates the mythological significance of Christ’s *coming back to life*. Frances Flannery examines the portrayal of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Saviour in the Synoptic Gospels, specifically with respect to the keying of Jesus’s image into longstanding mnemonic and cultural images of Asclepius. In doing so, she argues that the Gospels present Jesus as a healing deity who is superior to Asclepius; that, unlike Asclepius,

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only Jesus can routinely heal the sick and raise even the dead as if they were sleeping, without attachment to a physical place, without fees, and regardless of purity boundaries. Finally, Meredith Warren examines the crucifixion of Jesus in John's Gospel in light of the literary trope of *Scheintod* ("apparent death") in the Greek romance novels. In the novels, *Scheintod* points to the divinity of the heroines, for ordinary people are incapable of returning from the dead. Likewise, the moment of Jesus's death in John creates a similar instance of unreality in the narrative in which Jesus's death both occurs and is survived, signifying his divinity. By comparing Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross to the sacrificial *Scheintoten* of the Greek romances, Warren argues that Jesus's survival of death in John is readable as an event that concretises his association with his patron deity.

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