The Burial of the Missing Victims of Maritime Disasters: Fact and Fiction in Euripides' *Helen**

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Euripides' *Helen* includes a reference, unique of its kind in Greek tragedy and in the ancient sources, to the burial ceremony of a man who died at sea following a shipwreck (*nauagos*) and whose body had not been recovered. Euripides' description includes a symbolic burial rite that can be performed on land, as well as detailed instructions for the performance of the corresponding rite at sea. In this paper I shall examine the distinctive burial rites that the Greeks used for the victims of maritime disasters. Two interrelated questions will be addressed: First, how closely does this piece of dramatic fiction reflect an actual practice? Secondly, does this single account correspond to the rites performed for missing *nauagoi* in Athens in the late fifth century BCE? Furthermore, were such rituals actually performed? And if there were none, then what materials, which might have been familiar to his audience, did Euripides exploit in the fictive description that he offers?

1. Background: the Deception

The plot of the *Helen* is set in Egypt on the island of Pharos, and takes place seven years after the destruction of Troy. Helen, according to Euripides' version in the play, has been living in Egypt ever since she had left home; Troy has only seen her phantom image.[1] After the death of Proteus, the Egyptian king, his son Theoclymenus is trying to force Helen to marry him. At the same time Menelaus, her husband, lands in Egypt after his

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1 Euripides adopts here the mythical version found in Stesichorus 15 (Page) and Herodotus (2.113-120), according to which Helen never reached Troy, but stayed in Egypt during the war; Herodotus, unlike Stesichorus and Euripides, does not mention the existence of an *eidōlon* of Helen which reached Troy instead of her.

ship has been wrecked; his clothes are in tatters, as befitting a survivor of a maritime disaster. Menelaus encounters the real Helen and the couple is happy to have found each other. Helen, who wants to thwart the undesirable marriage and avoid potential bloodshed between the two men, contrives a scheme to flee from Egypt to Sparta. She plans to tell the king that Menelaus had been lost at sea, a story which is unlikely to arouse suspicion since drowning was a common cause of death.[2] Next, she will ask the king for a ship in order to pay her husband, allegedly lost with his vessel, last honors at sea.[3] Menelaus, disguised as a servant who survived the shipwreck in which Helen's husband had supposedly lost his life, would help her perform these rites.

The account of the deception planned and carried out by Helen and Menelaus spans some 600 lines (1049-1626) and offers many details about the rite for maritime casualties. Death at sea naturally entails an unorthodox burial rite,[4] as it sometimes involves a decomposing body that has drifted ashore, and more commonly no body at all. In order to set their escape plan in motion, Helen and Menelaus had first to establish the absence of a body (1208-1209). Accordingly, when Theoclymenus inquires as to the site of the maritime disaster, Menelaus "the survivor" points to a far-off site of the supposed shipwreck — the rocky shore of Lybia, thus precluding the possibility of finding the corpse (1210-1211). Theoclymenus then asks whether a burial has been performed (1222), still assuming there was indeed a body. In Greek sacred law, covering the body with dust was a token act of burial, an honor to be paid to the dead when a proper burial could not be performed.[5] In our case, where it is plain that the body cannot be found and a burial must take place without physical remains, reference is made to Menelaus' mock burial in two contexts: terrestrial and maritime burials.

2. Burial in its Terrestrial Context

Terrestrial burial for a *nauagos*, whose body has not been recovered, is mentioned several times throughout Helen's dealings with Menelaus and Theoclymenus. We first hear of it when Helen reveals her escape plan to Menelaus and alludes to an empty tomb for the maritime victim (1057-1058):

> ὡς δὴ θανόντα σ' ἐνάλιον κενῶι τάφωι
> θάψαι τύραννον τῆσδε γῆς αἰτήσομαι.
>
> I will beg the king of this country for permission to bury you in an empty tomb,
> as one who has indeed died at sea.

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2 See Vermeule 1979: 187, who convincingly argues that more Greek cenotaphs were erected for the bodies of drowned men than for soldiers killed in land battle.

3 For Helen's obligation to participate in the burial ceremony of Menelaus as the closest female relative of the dead, see 1275-1277 discussed below pp. 34-35 with n. 44.

4 Ordinary funeral rites and proper form of burial are discussed below *passim* and compared with the special death rituals for the missing.

5 See e.g. *Od*. 11.75-76; S. *Ant*. 245-256 and the scholia on 255, 429; and see Parker 1983: 44 'There was a generally recognized obligation for anyone who encountered an untended corpse — a drowned man on the seashore, for instance — to perform at least a token act of burial'.

Menelaus, who does not fully understand her plan at first, thinks that she has a terrestrial burial in mind and retorts that they must have a boat if they are to stand a chance to survive. He wonders what advantage a cenotaph will have, with no boat at hand (1059-1060):

καὶ δὴ παρεῖκεν· εἶτα πῶς ἄνευ νεὼς
σωθησόμεσθα κενοταφοῦντ' ἐμὸν δέμας;

Suppose he does allow it; how shall we escape,
having buried my body in an empty tomb, without a boat?

Then, when Helen explains that she will ask to perform the rites at sea, Menelaus expresses his concern that the Egyptian king might insist on a terrestrial burial (1063-1064):

ὡς εὖ τόδ' εἶπας πλὴν ἕν· εἰ χέρσωι ταφὰς
θεῖναι κελεύσει σ', οὐδὲν ἡ σκῆψις φέρει.

It is all very well, except for one thing: should he command you
to set up a tomb on dry land, our scheme will be to no avail.

It is evident from Menelaus' words that the notion of terrestrial burial for a missing body does not seem strange to him, and this implies that the practice was not uncommon. Theoclymenus too refers to terrestrial burial. When Helen asks for permission to bury her dead husband, after telling Theoclymenus that there was no funeral and that the body is missing, he wonders whether it is perhaps a shadow that she intends to bury (1239-1240):

Ἑλ. τὸν κατθανόντα πόσιν ἐμὸν θάψαι θέλω.
Θε. τί δ'; ἔστ' ἀπόντων τύμβος; ἢ θάψεις σκιάν;

Hel. I wish to bury my dead husband.
The. What? Is there a tomb for the missing? Or are you to bury a shadow?

But having been persuaded by Helen that it is the Greek practice —

Ἕλλησίν ἐστι νόμος, ὃς ἂν πόντωι θάνηι …

It is customary among the Hellenes, whenever someone dies at sea… (1241)

she states — Theoclymenus gives his consent to the burial. He naturally assumes a token ceremony will be held on land (1244):

κτέριζ'· ἀνίστη τύμβον οὗ χρήιζεις χθονός·

Perform a burial. Erect a tomb wherever you desire in the country.

Euripides is making use of historical practice here. In order to explore the historicity of the rites mentioned in the *Helen*, I shall first examine the extant testimonies concerning the burial of missing bodies, those termed οἱ ἀφανεῖς (*aphaneis*). Graves in Ancient Greece usually consisted of a mound of earth and an inscribed tombstone, under which the remains of the deceased (ashes or body) were placed.[6] Graves such as these, when set

6 See Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 71-72, 79-84, 96-99, 105-108.

up for missing persons, were referred to as cenotaphs, i.e. empty tombs. A variety of Greek terms and expressions serve to designate an 'empty tomb': κενοτάφιον,[7] τάφος κενός (as in our play),[8] κεινὰ χώματα,[9] (κενὸν) σῆμα,[10] κενὸν μνῆμα[11] and κενήριον.[12] The sepulchral monuments of these graves, built in stone and generally accompanied by an inscription, were set up to mark the grave, to present the deceased and to commemorate him — just as if in a "normal burial".[13] However, these monuments did not serve simply as memorials to the dead; the stone became a symbolic sign of the deceased and pointed to his presence among the living.[14]

Evidence for the prevalent Greek custom of holding a burial in honor of a deceased person whose body was not recovered dates back to the Homeric epic. Athena, in the first book of the *Odyssey,* tells Telemachus what he must do if he learns that his father has died abroad:

> εἰ δέ κε τεθνηῶτος ἀκούσηις μηδ' ἔτ' ἐόντος,
> νοστήσας δὴ ἔπειτα φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
> σῆμά τέ οἱ χεῦαι καὶ ἐπὶ κτέρεα κτερείξαι
> πολλὰ μάλ'...
>
> But should you hear that he is dead and no longer alive,
> return to your native land
> and heap a mound up for him, and in addition pay funeral rites,
> full many as are due... [15]

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7 E.g. X. *An*. 6.4.9; Plu. *Moralia* 349b, 870e-f; App. *Mith*. 96.

8 E.g. Lyc. 366; Paus. 2.20.6.

9 E.g. Hdt. 9.85.

10 *Od*. 1.291, and see discussion immediately below.

11 E.g. Paus. 6.23.3, 9.18.4 and see below p. 30 with n. 26.

12 E.g. Dieuchid. 3; Euph. 91; Lyc. 370; *AP* 7.569; Hdn. *Epim*. 62.8; Sch. on Ar. *Lys*. 646.

13 See Burkert 1985: 193-194; for types of gravestones see Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 84-89, 121-137, 218-246. For the significance of a *stēlē* in the eyes of Athenians see Garland 2001[2]: 119.

14 See Bruss 2005: 31-32. There is also archaeological evidence to suggest that substitute figures replaced the body or the remains: see Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 178 fig. 34, 179 for stone statuettes belonging to a possible cenotaph from Thera from the mid seventh century BCE. See too Karageorghis 1969: 151-164 esp. 155-156 and pls. xii, xv-xvi for pieces of several fourth century life-size clay statues from Cyprian Salamis, belonging to a royal family. For identification of the cenotaph as belonging to a royal family see ibid.: 163-164 and pl. xi; and see below pp. 36-37 with n. 59 for additional features of these two cenotaphs; see also Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 259 and fig. 56. Cf. Hdt. 6.58.3 for an account of images of Spartan kings who died in battle. These images, rather than the actual corpses, were carried on the funeral bier, perhaps because the bodies had not been preserved: ὃς δ' ἂν ἐν πολέμῳ τῶν βασιλέων ἀποθάνῃ, τούτῳ δὲ εἴδωλον σκευάσαντες ἐν κλίνῃ εὖ ἐστρωμένῃ ἐκφέρουσι.

15 *Od*. 1.289-292 and cf. 2.220-223. Cf. also Agamemnon's cenotaph in Egypt erected by Menelaus after he heard of his brother's murder in Argos in *Od*. 4.584 and the scholia. For another (Hellenistic) instance of a cenotaph erected abroad, while the bones are buried at home, see *GVI* 1745.

Chariton, writing in the second century CE, confirms that this indeed was an ancient custom:

> καὶ γὰρ εἰ μὴ τὸ σῶμα εὕρηται τοῦ δυστυχοῦς, ἀλλὰ νόμος οὗτος ἀρχαῖος Ἑλλήνων, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς ἀφανεῖς τάφοις κοσμεῖν.
>
> For it is an ancient custom with the Hellenes, when the body of the wretched is not to be found, to honor the missing with a proper burial as well.[16]

Thucydides tells us that in Athens, in public state funerals of war casualties in the fifth century BCE,[17] funerary urns (probably inscribed with casualty lists and/or epigrams) with no remains of missing war victims were buried in the *Dēmosion Sēma* along the route from Dipylon to the Academy. They were given honors for the dead, the *geras thanontōn*, similar to those accorded to the dead whose remains were found and brought to burial.[18] Cenotaphs were also erected as additions to existing graves, which did contain the remains of dead persons. This practice probably gained momentum from the last quarter of the fifth century BCE, when according to archaeological evidence the honoring of war casualties ceased to be an exclusively public act, and it continued into the fourth century BCE.[19] Thus certain fallen soldiers had individual sepulchral monuments erected in their honor by their families, in addition to the group burial of their remains with the rest of the casualties in the *polyandrion*. The most familiar case is that of the horseman Dexileos, killed at Corinth in 394 BCE, in whose memory two cenotaphs, public and private, were erected. [20]

There is good reason to believe that cenotaphs inscribed with lists of the fallen were erected in Athens in honor of war casualties who could not be returned home and had been buried in the vicinity of the battlefield.[21] Such was the conventional treatment of casualties across Greece.[22] Herodotus cites a particularly telling example of the cenotaphs erected at Plataea at the end of the Persian Wars.[23] These were empty, totally fabricated graves — with no "fallen" to boast of. *Poleis* that had not taken part in the battle against the Persians at Plataea in 479 BCE nonetheless erected empty tombs alongside the graves of the dead in memory of their supposed casualties. They did this for posterity to remember, thus concealing their disgraceful failure to join their fellow Greeks in fighting the Persians. This may be an exceptional case, but it does attest to the

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16 Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, 4.1.3.

17 For the discussion on the date of the establishment of this ancestral custom, the *patrios nomos*, described in Thucydides, where it is difficult to be precise, see esp. Clairmont 1983: 9-15; Garland 2001[2]: 90.

18 Th. 2.34.1-5; The *geras thanontōn* mentioned in this passage includes lamentations and funeral gifts, the variety of which will be discussed below pp. 35-37 in association with funeral ceremony at sea.

19 See esp. Clairmont 1983: 19; Morris 1992: 143-144.

20 See Morris 1992: 143; for a detailed discussion see Clairmont 1983: 209-214, 219-221 and pls. 2-3a.

21 For presumed cenotaphs see Clairmont 1983: 17-18, 191-192, 205-209, 253-254 n. 7.

22 See e.g. Plu. *Moralia* 870 e-f, which refers to cenotaphs erected in the Isthmus for the Corinthians who died at the naval battle of Salamis in 480 BCE.

23 Hdt. 9.85.

widespread practice of erecting cenotaphs. In this context of unusual cenotaphs, we should note the evidence that such memorials were set up — usually as supplementary grave sites — in memory of prominent figures, such as Euripides.[24] Similarly honored were mythical figures, such as Heracles, whose remains could not be found,[25] or those whose remains were buried elsewhere in an unknown place or could not be identified, as was the case with certain heroes of the Trojan War.[26]

To sum up briefly: Cenotaphs were erected in a variety of circumstances, but were most often set up for those who lost their lives far from home, or for the dead whose remains were, for some reason, irrecoverable. In Classical Athens, cenotaphs formed part of a state burial complex on the Academy Road, but they were also used for private burials. This seems to suggest that the entire burial rite was carried out when the cenotaphs were set up, and that these markers received the same respectful treatment and funerary honors as other graves, but perhaps such rites were performed only when the body or its remains were missing and no such services had been performed elsewhere.[27]

Turning to the cenotaphs erected for *nauagoi* we find that only eight decipherable inscriptions of cenotaphs erected for casualties of specific maritime disasters have survived from the archaic and classical periods. Three inscriptions belong to the archaic period. The first is written on a slab of stone found in Corinth, dated to the end of the seventh century BCE. The inscription simply notes the name of the deceased (Δϝεινίας) and pronounces him a maritime casualty.[28] The early date of the inscription indicates that the issue of *nauagoi* was already relevant at the time of the first tomb inscriptions dating from the seventh century BCE.

The second inscription, which dates to the end of the sixth century BCE, hails from Corcyra[29] and was composed in honor of a *proxenos* of Corcyra, Menecrates from Oianthia. This epigram was inscribed on a rock embedded in the wall surrounding the tumulus of a magnificent public tomb of an official, which was erected by the *dēmos* of Corcyra and the brother of the deceased. Since the inscription is couched in civic terms and contains no information regarding the nature and circumstances of Menecrates' death, and given that the tomb was empty at the time it was dug, it is probable that it was a cenotaph, even though the inscription itself does not include any definite proof for this assumption.[30]

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24 *Vita Euripidis* 2.26-28 (Schwartz): καὶ ἐτάφη ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ· κενοτάφιον δὲ αὐτοῦ [ἐν] Ἀθήνησιν ἐγένετο καὶ ἐπίγραμμα ἐπεγέγραπτο Θουκυδίδου τοῦ ἱστοριογράφου ποιήσαντος, ἢ Θιμοθέου τοῦ μελοποιοῦ.

25 D.S. 4.38.5-39.1.

26 Paus. 6.23.3 (Achilles in Elis), 9.18.4 (Teiresias in Thebes); Lyc. 1047 (Calchas in Apulia); cf. Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 299 for a cenotaph *hērōon* from the Hellenistic period. Since a cenotaph *hērōon* is part of the general category of the hero cult, it will not be discussed here.

27 Thus Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 258.

28 *CEG* 132 = *GVI* 53 = FH 2. For the possibility that Dweinias' monument may be a cenotaph see Bruss 2005: 27-28.

29 *CEG* 143 = *GVI* 42 = FH 26.

30 See Bruss 2005: 89; Wallace 1970: 98 with n. 9.

It is only in a third inscription on a stele-shaped tombstone found in Sicynus and dated to the early fifth century BCE, that we find a caption explicitly indicating that the dead man's body was never recovered. The monument was erected by the half-brother of a man lost at sea:

μνᾶμα Νέωι φθιμ[έ]νωι Σ̣ω̣σ̣ικρα[τ]ί[δας] | τόδ' ἔθηκε, |
ματρικασί[γνητος]· | πόντ̣ο̣ς δ̣' [αὐ]τ[όν] | με κάλυφ̣σ̣ε̣ν̣.

Sosikratidas has erected this memorial in honor of Neos,
his uterine brother, who perished. And the sea has covered
my body.[31]

There are five additional inscriptions dating to the fourth century BCE. An elegiac epitaph of a "public" nature, found in Arcesine, Amorgos, states that death took place at sea, but has no specific reference to a missing body.[32] A fragmentary epigram from Piraeus, dated to 350 BCE and inscribed on a public memorial for victims of a maritime disaster, again has no reference to the whereabouts of the corpses.[33] An epigram on a stele found in Amphipolis,[34] of which only one line remains, indicates that the deceased found his death in the waters of the Strymon. Here a maritime death is clearly acknowledged, but we are not told that the grave does not contain a body.

It is only in two inscriptions from the fourth century BCE that we find explicit mention of bodies lost at sea. The first is an epitaph from Piraeus from 360 BCE[35] which is inscribed on a marble stele and dedicated to a mother. An empty grave marker is erected by its side, in memory of the mother's eight-year-old son who died at sea. At the end of the first stanza we learn that the deceased woman grieves over the death of her child (3-4):

οἰκτρὰν Φοίνικος παιδὸς πενθῶσα τελευτήν,
ὃς θάνεν ὀκταέτης ποντίωι ἐν πελάγει.

Mourning the lamentable end of her child Phoenix,
who died at the age of eight in the depths of the sea.

The last two lines in the inscription indicate that his grave has not been graced with pity, as his body remained at sea (7-8):

... ὃς τὸν ἄνοικτον
τύμβον ἔχει, δνοφερῶι κείμενος ἐμ πελάγει

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31 I follow *GVI* 163; according to the restoration proposed by *CEG* 166, Sosikratidas is the name of the deceased, but the arguments for rejecting the *GVI* version are not convincing enough. Anyway, the second sentence of both versions (*CEG* 166 πόντος δ' [αὐ]τ[όν] | μ' ἐκάλυφσεν) clearly demonstrates that the body was left at sea. As for the translation of [αὐ]τ[όν] | με which means literally 'me myself' (cf. Bruss 2005: 31), I have chosen to translate this as 'my body' to sharpen the opposition between the absent corpse and the extant μνᾶμα which stands over an empty tomb.

32 *CEG* 664 = *GVI* 80.

33 *CEG* 466 = *GVI* 26. See also Clairmont 1983: 219 n. 78 who connects this epitaph with Paus.1.29.13: ἐτάφησαν ... καὶ ὅσους ἐς Θεσσαλίαν Λεωσθένης ἤγαγε ...

34 *CEG* 722 = *GVI* 929.

35 *CEG* 526 = *GVI* 1985.

… who possesses this pitiless grave, since he lies in dark sea …

The second is also an epigram from Piraeus,[36] inscribed on a stele in which three people are commemorated: a father, his son, and his daughter. It is most probably a cenotaph, as the fourth verse hints that the bodies remained at sea (4):

[θ]νήισκομεν Αἰγ<α>ίου | κύμασι πλαζόμενοι.

We die, wandering among the Aegean waves.

In the absence of an explicit indication, it is difficult in many cases to determine conclusively whether a grave is empty or not. The archaeological evidence from the archaic and classical periods is sparse and tomb inscriptions do not always mention specifically whether the body of the deceased remained at sea. Bruss notes that the scarcity of tomb inscriptions dedicated to maritime casualties is due to the fact that they cannot mark a 'hidden presence', but rather indicate a 'hidden absence'. Indeed, contrary to their very purpose, they do not denote a proper burial in its proper place, dry land, but point to the impossibility of burial, with the body lost at sea.[37] Moreover, information regarding casualties of maritime disasters is scarcely found in the works of historians, who usually do little more than cite the duty to recover bodies from the sea or erect a tombstone for those missing.[38] We do have some epigrams from the Hellenistic period (mostly from the poets Callimachus, Leonidas and Asclepiades) that are dedicated to missing victims of maritime disasters, yet these are fictive inscriptions composed for artistic purposes rather than practical ones, and consequently are of limited value in reconstructing historical reality.[39]

Besides the *Helen*, there is very little evidence of a uniquely attested rite performed for missing *nauagoi* — only two references from the post-classical period: in the scholia and in a commentary on Homer's *Odyssey.* These two sources tell of an ancient custom practiced by Athenians when giving the last honors to the missing victims of maritime disasters away from home: the comrades of the deceased stood along the shore, called out the name of each of the deceased three times and then moved away. This act served to symbolize the carrying of the dead souls back home.[40] The custom is not recorded in any other ancient source and may well stem from a late interpretation of Homer's works. Thus, in the absence of further evidence, it is hard to determine whether this was indeed the actual practice.

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36 *CEG* 544 = *GVI* 1250.

37 See Bruss 2005: 88, 96.

38 Th. 1.54; D.S. 15.35.1; and cf. X. *HG* 1.6.33-1.7.35; D.S. 13.100-103.2, 15.35.1 who refer to the naval battle of Arginusae in 406 BCE and the subsequent trial of the generals who were accused of failing to rescue the survivors and recover the bodies of casualties from the sea.

39 For a full discussion see Bruss 2005: 17, 97-167.

40 Sch.on *Od*. 9.62: οὕτω καὶ ᾽Αθηναῖοι κενοτάφιον ποιοῦντες τῶν ἐν τῇ θαλάττῃ ἀπολομένων ἔστησαν παρὰ τὸν αἰγιαλόν, καὶ ἐφώνουν τρίτον αὐτῶν τὰ ὀνόματα, καὶ οὕτως ἀνεχώρουν. For the presumed origin of this custom see *Od*. 9.64-66 and the scholia; Eust. *Od*. 1.322.5-7.

The only thing we can determine with certainty, despite the scarce information, is that there was indeed a custom of erecting cenotaphs in memory of the missing victims of maritime disasters. Consequently, when Euripides mentions the burial on land of a shipwreck victim whose body was lost at sea, he refers to practices that were grounded in reality and were probably familiar to his Athenian audience of the late fifth century BCE.

3. Burial in its Maritime Context

We now return to the play. Throughout the account of the planned deception, Euripides refers *in extenso* and in detail to rites performed at sea for the dead whose bodies were lost in water. The first reference occurs when Helen discusses the escape scheme she has devised with Menelaus. She tells Menelaus about her plan to ask Theoclymenus for a boat in order to pay the dead last honors at sea (1061-1062):

> δοῦναι κελεύσω πορθμίδ', ἧι καθήσομεν
> κόσμον τάφωι σῶι πελαγίους ἐς ἀγκάλας.
>
> I will exhort him to give me a vessel, from which we shall
> cast funerary honors for your tomb into the sea's embrace.[41]

Menelaus suggests that the king may want to hold the rite on land (1063-1064, see above) to which Helen retorts that she will tell Theoclymenus that it is not the Greek custom to bury their maritime casualties on land (1065-1066):

> ἀλλ' οὐ νομίζειν φήσομεν καθ' Ἑλλάδα
> χέρσωι καλύπτειν τοὺς θανόντας ἐναλίους.
>
> But I will assert it is not the custom in Hellas to bury
> on land those who have perished at sea.

Menelaus, having grasped her intentions, recaps the escape scheme with the following words (1067-1068):

> ... εἶτ' ἐγὼ συμπλεύσομαι
> καὶ συγκαθήσω κόσμον ἐν ταὐτῶι σκάφει.
>
> Then I will sail with you and help cast down the funerary honors,
> in the same boat.

And indeed, when Helen turns to Theoclymenus with her request and receives his permission to hold burial rites for Menelaus, she makes it clear that contrary to his assumption, it is not the Greek custom to hold such rites on land (1245):

> οὐχ ὧδε ναύτας ὀλομένους τυμβεύομεν.
>
> We do not give such burial to sailors who have perished.

She adds that full honors are paid at sea to those who have drowned (1247):

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41 I translate κόσμος here as '(funeral) honors' (*LSJ* s.v. II.2), because in the play it signifies the adornment, burial gifts and offerings for the dead and his grave as integral elements in performing due burial rites; and see below pp. 35-37.

ἐς πόντον ὅσα χρὴ νέκυσιν ἐξορμίζομεν.

We cast to the sea all that is a dead man's due.

Theoclymenus is curious about such burials at sea and Helen refers him to the 'expert', Menelaus (1249) for information (1252-1253):

Θε. πῶς τοὺς θανόντας θάπτετ' ἐν πόντωι νεκρούς;
Με. ὡς ἂν παρούσης οὐσίας ἕκαστος ἦι.

Th. How do you bury those who died at sea?
Me. Each according to his own means.

Once Theoclymenus consents to hold the rites at sea and promises to supply all the means required for it (1254), Menelaus clearly needs to assure that the ship will be a considerable distance from the shore so as to secure the escape. He goes on to explain to Theoclymenus that the rites must be held far from the shore for fear of pollution from the remains of the sacrifice for the dead (1268-1271):

Θε. πόσον δ' ἀπείργειν μῆκος ἐκ γαίας δόρυ;
Με. ὥστ' ἐξορᾶσθαι ῥόθια χερσόθεν μόλις.
Θε. τί δή; τόδ' Ἑλλὰς νόμιμον ἐκ τίνος σέβει;
Με. ὡς μὴ πάλιν γῆι λύματ' ἐκβάληι κλύδων.

Th. How far should the ship be kept away from shore?
Me. Until the dashing (of the oars) is scarcely seen from dry land.
Th. But why? Why does Hellas observe this custom?
Me. So that the waves may not wash the pollution back ashore.

At this point, it should be noted that in the context of an actual Greek ritual, pollution was closely linked to death and, therefore, after performing burials, it was customary to take measures of purification such as cleansing the household and its objects with water or seawater.[42]

Finally, in order to secure Helen's presence at the ceremony on board ship, Menelaus informs Theoclymenus of the religious duty of the closest kinswoman of the deceased to see to his burial (1275-1277):

Με. μητρὸς τόδ' ἔργον ἢ γυναικὸς ἢ τέκνων.
Θε. ταύτης ὁ μόχθος, ὡς λέγεις, θάπτειν πόσιν.
Με. ἐν εὐσεβεῖ γοῦν νόμιμα μὴ κλέπτειν νεκρῶν.

Me. It is a task of a mother, a wife, or children.
Th. It is her toil, from what you say, to bury her husband,
Me. Yes, for piety dictates that the dead shall not be cheated of their due.

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42 For the thorough cleansing of the household and contents with sea water, as part of purification process, see e.g. *LSCG* 97A14-1; and see Parker 1983: 38; Burkert 1985: 79; Alexiou 2002[2]: 10. For the pollution of death (*miasma*) and the means used to avert it, including *katharsis*, see e.g. E. *Alc*. 98-100 and the scholia; Ar. *Eccl*. 1033 and the scholia; Ath. 9.78; see also Parker 1983: 32-48, 70; Sourvinou-Inwood 2004: 168-170. For the sea as a mighty purifier of all kinds of pollution see e.g. *Il*. 1.314; E. *IT* 1033-1047, esp. 1039, and 1157-1233, esp. 1191-1193.

Although Helen's participation is fundamental to the escape plan, it is based on the genuine funeral practice in ancient Greece. For, in addition to the traditional role of women in the funerary rituals (preparation of the corpse for burial, performing lamentation and participating in funeral offerings), it was the duty of the closest kinswoman to undertake the burial of the deceased in the absence of a male relative.[43]

In the course of their discussion, Helen and Menelaus also inform Theoclymenus about most of the items which are essential for performing the ritual itself. Their delineation of the various steps of the procedure and the items needed for the preparation of the burial and the honors paid to the dead[44] is based on an actual burial procedure and on the practice of erecting cenotaphs, as I shall argue below. The funerary honors referred to in the play as κόσμος (1068), κόσμος τάφωι (1062), κόσμος νεκρῶι (1279), ἐνάλια κτερίσματα (1391), ἐντάφια νεκρῶι (1404) and ποντίσματα (1548),[45] include adornments for the corpse as well as burial gifts and offerings for the dead and his grave. The adornment comprises things directly associated with the dead, such as the funeral bier and robes, objects which feature in the customary ritual procedure of preparing the body for burial. The dead, having been treated and wrapped in robes,[46] was placed on a bier or in a coffin complete with a mattress.[47] This was done so as to present the body and take up dirges at the laying out of the corpse (*prothesis*), which was the first stage of the funeral (*kēdeia/kēdos*).[48] Then the deceased was carried, usually on a bier, in a funerary procession (*ekphorā*) to the burial site.[49] In our case, however, the robes and the bed of the deceased make a symbolic appearance, as there is, after all, no corpse. Empty robes in which the rite is performed are included in Helen's instructions to Theoclymenus (1243):

> κενοῖσι θάπτειν ἐν πέπλων ὑφάσμασιν.
>
> (It is the custom) to bury the dead in empty woven robes.

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43 Cf. e.g. A. *Ag*. 1553; S. *Ant*. 71-72, 245-256, 384-385, 404, 429-431; E. *Hec*. 726-732, 894-897; cf. e.g. *CEG* 43, 117; and see Hame 2004 about the connection between the death ritual, family, gender and property of the *oikos* in classical Athens. Other women's funerary duties mentioned in the *Helen* are lamenting the deceased (1053-1054, 1224) and honoring his grave with offerings (1399-1401, 1403-1404). The latter is mentioned after Theoclymenus' second suggestion that Helen stay behind and let others perform the rite (1392-1394); for women's dominating roles in actual death ritual see esp. Stears 1998; Dillon 2002: 168-192.

44 For the fact that most of the items required for the burial are at the same time useful to the escape plan, see William 2008: 290 on 1255-1278 nn.

45 For the meaning of κόσμος see above n. 41. For ἐνάλια κτερίσματα and ποντίσματα as terms of the funeral honors in an exclusively maritime context see the discussion below p. 37.

46 See e.g. *Il*. 18.352-353; *Od*. 24.293; E. *Hec*. 578; *LCSG* 97A2-4; Artemidorus 2.3.21-22 Pack; cf. Ahlberg 1971: figs. 31a, 36, 37. For a summary of all stages of dressing and decorating the dead see Garland 2001[2]: 24-26.

47 See e.g. *Il*. 18.352; *LCSG* 97A6-7, 13-14; cf. Boardman 1955: pls. 4, 8; Ahlberg 1971: 47-49 and figs. 2, 3, 4, 24, 25, 27a, 29.

48 For a full discussion of the *prothesis* see Vermeule 1979: 13-17; Garland 2001[2]: 23-31.

49 See Garland 2001[2]: 31-34; Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 144-145 and pls. 5, 34.

A bedecked bed, which in this case, of course, is also empty, is mentioned by Menelaus later on (1261): … στρωτὰ φέρεται λέκτρα σώματος κενά. … 'a bedecked bier devoid of a corpse is carried (in procession)'. We also find a notable example of an empty bed in Thucydides, in the context of a cenotaph, in a passage about the funeral of missing Peloponnesian war casualties.[50]

The burial (*taphē* or *taphos*)[51] usually took place on the third day after death. The body, or its remains, depending on the type of burial — inhumation or cremation — was buried in the ground and funerary honors were paid, including gifts (weapons, jewelry, clothes etc.) and offerings (a variety of food and drink) to the dead and his grave.[52] The gifts or grave goods which are cited in our play include weapons — bronze arms (1263) or a spear (1377) — which were generally dedicated to dead soldiers as suitable for warriors.[53] The burial offerings consisted of produce (1265) — a mundane item in the funerary rite[54] — and libations of the blood of the sacrifice animal, as Menelaus informs Theoclymenus (1255):

προσφάζεται μὲν αἷμα πρῶτα νερτέροις.

First the blood offerings for the dead must be made beforehand.

An additional reference to this rite also appears in the messenger's description of the deception and escape of Helen and Menelaus which he relates to Theoclymenus (1562-1564): ταύρειον δέμας … σφάγια τῶι τεθνηκότι 'a bull … as a sacrificial offering to the dead'. This act has its roots in the custom of slaughtering an animal for the dead on the day of burial[55] and pouring its blood on the grave (the *haimokouria*).[56]

There is some archaeological evidence that the kinds of gifts and offerings mentioned above in the ceremony on board ship were also associated with cenotaphs.[57] In Thera, a

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50 Th. 2.34.3, above n. 18; cf. also Hdt. 6.58, above n. 14.

51 For the burial process see Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 145-146; Garland 2001[2]: 34-37.

52 For the variety of funeral gifts and offerings in general see Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 100-105, 203-212; Burkert 1985: 192-193 and below *passim*.

53 For the kinds of weapons see Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 52 figs. 5, 62-63, 75, 110, 203, 205, 207; and cf. below n. 59.

54 Cf. e.g. Th. 3.58.4. For food offerings in general see Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 64-67, 76, 178, 205, 215 and pls. 37-38; and cf. below n. 59.

55 A burial sacrifice (*prosphagma*) generally took place before cremation or inhumation (see e.g. *Il*. 23.29-34, *Od*. 24.65-66; E. *Alc*. 845; Plu. *Sol*. 21.6). There are also testimonies to confirm that the sacrifice was made in the deceased's house beforehand (see e.g. *LSCG* 97A 12-13 [*prosphagion*]; Pl. *Min*. 315c); for a general discussion see Rohde 1925[8] : 164, 190 n. 46; Garland 2001[2]: 112-113; for the reference at hand see Kannicht, 1969: 407-409 on 1560-1564 nn.

56 For *haimokouria* for the dead in general see e.g. Pi. *O*. 1.90; Plu. *Arist*. 21. For libations at burials see e.g. *LSCG* 97A 8-9; S. *Ant*. 430-431, 901-902; cf. Kurtz 1975: pls. 42.2, 43.2. For the kinds of liquids and the manner of execution see esp. Burkert 1985: 71-73.

57 Xenophon in *Anabasis* (6.4.9) recounts the practice of placing wreaths on the surface of a burial mound of cenotaphs: οὓς δὲ μὴ ηὕρισκον, κενοτάφιον αὐτοῖς ἐποίησαν μέγα, καὶ στεφάνους ἐπέθεσαν. Although this specific feature has not been recorded in the *Helen* (and hence will not be brought into our discussion), it testifies to the honoring of the cenotaphs with ordinary burial gifts.

variety of vases was found as well as metal objects and bones (that are not conclusively identified as human), inside what is presumed to be a cenotaph commemorating a mass disaster from the mid-seventh century BCE.[58] Another example is the most remarkable cenotaph erected for the royal family of the last king of Salamis in Cyprus, Nikokreon, who killed his family and then committed suicide by burning down his castle rather than surrender to Ptolemaios in 311/310 BCE, and in which *alabastra* (for libations), strigils, fragments of weapons (such as armbands from shields) and jewelry were found, as well as articles of dress and food offerings in a carbonized condition.[59]

So given that the ritual features performed in the *Helen* for the missing *nauagoi* at sea were customary in the ritual ceremonies in the presence of a body, and most of them are also attested by the archaeological evidence and in written sources in association with empty graves erected on land, it would appear that Euripides had actually introduced features of terrestrial burial in the case of missing bodies — performed as proper rites — to the maritime arena. The exclusively maritime context of these consecrations is referred to only twice:

(a) The adjective ἐνάλια is attached by Theoclymenus to the noun κτερίσματα, a conventional term for 'consecrations'[60] (1390-1391):

> χωρεῖτ' ἐφεξῆς, ὡς ἔταξεν ὁ ξένος,
> δμῶες, φέροντες ἐνάλια κτερίσματα.
>
> Go servants, one by one, as decreed by the foreigner,
> carrying along consecrations to bury with the dead at sea.

(b) The specific word ποντίσματα is used by a messenger in reference to the offerings that are to be cast into the sea (1547-1549):

> οἱ δ' ἐκβαλόντες δάκρυα ποιητῶι τρόπωι
> ἐς ναῦν ἐχώρουν Μενέλεωι ποντίσματα
> φέροντες...
>
> And they boarded the boat with feigned tears,
> carrying offerings that should be cast into the sea
> for Menelaus…

At this point, it is important to note that the word ποντίσματα is a *hapax legomenon* that appears once and only here.

4. Fiction and reality

We can thus see references to the burial of maritime casualties in the absence of a body in the *Helen*, with a brief account of burial on land and an elaborate and detailed description of a feigned ceremony held at sea. Comparing this information with the evidence from literary, historic and archaeological sources outside tragedy (sparse

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58 See above n. 14.

59 See Karageorghis 1969: 153-154, 162, 164 and pls. xiii-xiv; for additional information about this cenotaph see above n. 14.

60 For features of consecrations (i.e. funerary honors) that appear on stage, so as to be visible to the audience, see William 2008: 312 on 1390-1391 with notes.

though it is), we can demonstrate that terrestrial burials in empty graves were entrenched in historical reality.

Burial at sea, however, seems to be different, so that there are two possible arguments about the performance of rites at sea in Athens of the late fifth century BCE:

(a) The fictive account in the *Helen* is based on a rite which was indeed held at sea, and it features as part of the deception only in our play, for the sake of the plot.

(b) No rites for the dead were held at sea in Athens. Euripides used the fictive account of rites at sea solely for dramatic purposes. Because his aim as a dramatist, after all, was to create a credible scenario for his audience, he faithfully copied actual features of terrestrial burials performed in honour of missing dead. These burials themselves were essentially based on the standard conventions that were performed when a body of the deceased was at hand.

Had there been evidence in non-dramatic texts about the rituals of burial at sea, we would have been able to determine whether the rite described in the *Helen* was held according to existing custom. But a single reference in a strictly literary genre, with no other parallels in the ancient sources, renders it difficult to reach such a conclusion. Although this obstacle in itself does not rule out the existence of such rites in reality, the function of the grave and the tombstone, which named and commemorated the deceased,[61] tips the scales in favour of argument (b). In practice, after the burial the grave-site became a sacred place for kinsmen and descendants where they paid honours to the soul of the dead on memorial days.[62] If burials of the missing dead had been held at sea, this would have prevented their relatives from paying honors and performing the customary ritual duties (*ta nomizomena*) at their graves. For common sense would dictate that since it was decided to perform a token burial for the dead without a body, measures would then be duly taken to provide a permanent site for commemorating the dead thereafter. The very existence of cenotaphs in honor of those that were lost at sea can attest to this. The following details from the *Helen* further strengthen the argument against burial at sea: First, when Helen mentions the fictive burial, both Theoclymenus and Menelaus promptly assume that it is a terrestrial burial that she has in mind, which shows that this must have been the familiar custom. Secondly, the word *pontismata*, which relates exclusively to offerings cast into the sea, is a *hapax legomenon* and never appears in any other context except that of our play in association with the fictive death ritual at sea.

Thus it seems most improbable that any rites were held at sea for missing maritime casualties. The dramatist, even though this is a tale of deception, had to provide an account that his audience would find credible in order to suspend their disbelief. Thus he introduces a terrestrial rite held in honor of the missing dead, including those lost at sea. The act of transferring the rite to the maritime arena (a location at odds with the rite for the dead and anomalous in Greek custom, as the land is its natural setting) is, beyond the requirements of the plot, a poignant dramatic tool for emphasizing the absurdity and

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61 See Vermeule 1979: 188 ‘A man lost at sea might be less likely to join his family in the underworld, unless the incomplete burial could be strengthened by ceremony and a stone, a partly magical function’; and cf. above p. 28 with nn. 13-14.

62 For a full discussion see Rohde 1925[8]: 166-170; Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 145-148; Burkert 1985: 193-194; Garland 2001[2]: 40-41, 104-120; Alexiou 2002[2]: 7-10.

irony in human experience. After all, the maritime scene in ancient Greece was designed for rituals of a different kind,[63] which were not wholly unfamiliar to the Athenian audience. Thus there is evidence of animal sacrifices cast into the sea, slaughtered in advance or drowned alive, as part of the cult of Poseidon and the gods of the rivers. Those were designed to pacify these divinities and to enlist their assistance.[64] In addition, there was extensive ritual activity associated with maritime undertakings. As the sea took the greatest death toll, mariners had many superstitions and required constant protection. For this purpose they held many ceremonies on board, including ritual acts comprising prayers, vows, libations and sacrifices made by travelers in order to assure a safe journey.[65] Evidence can be already found in epic poetry showing that rites of this sort were performed at the boat's stern, whence libations for the gods were cast to sea.[66] Thucydides tells of a wine libation poured into the sea and of wreaths (probably adorning the *amphorae* holding the libation fluids) that were cast away before the fleet set sail for Sicily in 415 BCE. These were part of the rite performed by the Athenian fleet to assure a successful voyage.[67] It is clear, therefore, that Euripides, in creating his fiction, combined various features from two different types of rituals which were practiced in Athens, so that some of the acts he describes were largely identical to those performed at sea for purposes other than rites for the dead.

To sum up. We have a glimpse of historical reality in the *Helen* — a missing body of a person that perished in a shipwreck — that has found its literary manifestation in a contemporary play. In my opinion, this scenario must be linked in some way to the emotional atmosphere in Athens in the spring of 412 BCE, when the *Helen* was staged, only several months after the terrible defeat at Syracuse in the summer of 413 BCE, which left the Athenian fleet largely destroyed and the Athenian Empire under threat of downfall.[68] The majority of the dead had not received a proper burial since their bodies had been left behind in Sicily.[69] From this aspect, the *Helen*, albeit being *prima facie* "lighthearted" and "romantic", may also be seen as reflecting the atmosphere of despair and confusion that prevailed in Athens after the Sicilian disaster.[70] For the Athenian

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63 I shall not elaborate on rites that are not essential to this paper, but rather make do with a brief description of the main relevant evidence. These will serve to demonstrate the existence of burial rites at sea.

64 See e.g. *Il*. 21.130-131; Hdt. 6.76; Thphr. *apud* Ath. 6.79; Plu. *Moralia* 163b.

65 See Wachsmuth 1975: 69-70; they made sacrifices prior to setting sails while raising the anchor, *embatēria* (*hiera*) (see e.g. Philostr. *VA* 5.43; Hld. 4.16, 5.15) and when arriving at a safe haven, *apobatēria* (*hiera*) (see e.g. Poll. 2.200; St. Byz. s.v. βουθρωτός).

66 See *Od*. 15.222-223, 257-258, 260 for the parting of Telemachus, completed with a prayer to Athena, a sacrifice and a libation performed at the stern of his boat.

67 Th. 6.32.

68 See esp. Th. 7.87.6; 8.2.

69 For the possibility of erecting cenotaphs in memory of Sicilian casualties see Clairmont 1983: 17-18, 191-192. See also Plu. *Nic*. 17.4 = *TrGF* V T92 for an epitaph in honor of the Ahenians who perished in Syracuse, attributed to Euripides: οἵδε Συρακοσίους ὀκτὼ νίκας ἐκράτησαν ἄνδρες, ὅτ' ἦν τὰ θεῶν ἐξ ἴσου ἀμφοτέροις.

70 This however does not allow us to make the sweeping claim that we should read the *Helen* as an essentially "anti war" play, which is critical of Athenian war policy. (Here I follow William 2008: 5-9, who includes a summary of the debate over the question whether we

empire, which set sail for Sicily with such high hopes, failed even to bring its dead to proper burial. The manifestation of this mood is achieved both by the cynical use of the funerary ritual for the missing as part of the deception plan and by the elaborate account of this ritual detached from its natural context and transferred to the sea together with the absurd manipulation of features from a different ritualistic domain.

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should see the *Helen* as an anti-war play or not.) For the emotional atmosphere in Athens after the defeat see Th. 8.1.1-2. For the dichotomy of comic technique with tragic contents in the *Helen*, and an exhaustive discussion on the question whether the play can be regarded as tragedy or not, see Burian 2007: 30-35.

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