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## Musical Features of the Ritual Lament in Ancient Greece

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### Abstract

*This article considers one of the most ancient musical expressions of the Greeks: the lament. It was not only an ornamental element of various rituals but it was also a social reality. It hides specific meanings that need to be explained or, at the least, investigated. This article is far from being exhaustive but has the objective of explaining the importance of laments whilst underlining the difficulty of interpreting the literary and iconographic sources by using the Linos-song as a case study.*

Greek culture should not be analysed exclusively for its artistic, literary and philosophic contribution. Music has been considered marginal in comparison with these other aspects, but recent studies have shown how significant it was for the whole community.<sup>1</sup> Music represented more than an entertainment, especially in the archaic and classical periods. This article considers one of the musical expressions of the Greeks: the lament.<sup>2</sup> This choice comes initially from the fact that the lament was one of the most ancient forms of music, and it originated from a social need for sharing an event with the rest of the community rather than simply from the desire of individuals to be delighted by the sound of the voice or other instruments. The lament was therefore not merely an ornamental feature but it expressed and fulfilled a real social need. This article provides an introduction to the importance of Greek laments to a community and it addresses the difficulty of interpreting the literary and iconographic sources for a musical, and therefore fundamentally an aural, feature.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on music in ancient Greece see the following: West, M.L., *Ancient Greek Music*, 1992, Oxford; Pohlmann, E., West, M.L., *Documents of Ancient Greek Music: the Extant Melodies and Fragments*, 1992, Oxford University Press; Barker, A., *Greek Musical Writings I, The Musician and His Art*, 1984, Cambridge University Press; Barker, A., *Greek Musical Writings II, Harmonic and Acoustic Theory*, 1989, Cambridge University Press; Landels, G.J., *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 1999, London and New York, Routledge; Mathiesen, T.J., *Apollo's Lyre- Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and Middle Ages*, 2000, University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>2</sup> See Alexiou, M., *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, 1974, Cambridge.

In ancient Greece the lament was not a spontaneous outbreak of grief, but a carefully controlled expression of feelings adapted to ritual at every stage and endowed with musical features. One area of interest concerning this particular form of music is its adaptation to various, occasionally contrary, contexts. Before becoming a literary form – like the genre of *threnos* or the part of the tragedy called *kommos*<sup>3</sup> – the lament was performed during funeral rituals, for the death of gods and heroes, for remembering disasters affecting a city, or as a song devoted to legendary musicians (e.g. Linos).

The most natural context for the lamentation was the funerary ritual. In general this involved three stages: dying, being dead but before interment, and finally being dead and interred. Only the last two stages are given further examination here as the act of dying should be considered as a moment almost without ritualised expression and therefore without lamentation.<sup>4</sup> The funeral, or *kedeia*, also consisted of three stages: the laying out of the body (*prothesis*), its conveyance to the place of interment (*ekphora*) and finally, the depositing of its cremated or inhumed remains. After the death, the body was prepared for the *prothesis*, or wake. At this stage a series of rituals took place: the body was washed and the corpse was anointed and dressed. It was then laid on a bier with the feet placed towards the door and the head was decorated with garlands of laurel and celery.

After the corpse had been prepared the lamentation began. The kinswomen stood round the bier, with the chief mourner, either mother or wife, at the head. The chief mourner held the head of the deceased with both hands while the others tried to touch the hand of the dead. Mourners usually raised both hands above their head, sometimes beating their head and pulling at their loosened hair. According to both archaeological and literary evidence it is clear that a ritualised lament was sung at this stage of the

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the *threnos* and the differences between the lament and the *threnos* see Rossi, L., “Lamentazioni su Pietra e Letteratura “Trenodica”: Motivi Topici dei Canti Funerari”, (1999) *ZPE* 126, pp. 29-42; Catenacci, C., “Il Lamento Funebre tra la Grecia Antica e la *Greca* Salentina – A Proposito dei Canti di Pianto e d’Amore dall’Antico Salento Editi da V. Montanaro”, (1996) *QUCC* 53, pp. 150-15.; Alexiou, M., *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, at p. 102-104. For more on the *kommos* see Baldrey, H.C., *I Greci a Teatro*, 1998, Bari, pp. 90, 117, 154, 165; Cornford, M.F., “The so called Kommos in Greek Tragedy”, (1913) *CR*, 27 2, pp. 41-45.

<sup>4</sup> Garland, R., *The Greek Way of Death*, 1985, London, pp. 16 ff. explains the feelings, as they are described in literature, and the conceptions surrounding the act of dying.

burial. A particular form of dirge referred to by Homer was the *goos*.<sup>5</sup> This was an improvised lament sung by the relatives or close friends of the deceased with the accompaniment of the *aulos* (a reed instrument comparable to the modern oboe).<sup>6</sup> The lament was antiphonal: hired singers led with their formal dirge and the kinswomen followed with their *goos*.

The following stage before the burial was the *ekphora`*, the funeral procession. If unchecked, the mourners would not have proceeded in silence to the cemetery but would have tried to attract the maximum amount of public attention. Evidence for this is implied by the Athenian legislator Solon, who prescribed that men should lead the cortège whilst just a limited number of women, those accompanying the procession with the lamentation, should follow behind.<sup>7</sup> The corpse was carried on a wagon drawn by horse or mules or, more frequently, by pall-bearers.<sup>8</sup> Hired musicians accompanied the *ekphora`* playing Carian music.<sup>9</sup>

There is only partial information regarding what was involved in the process of the last stage of interment. It is probable that a small libation was made to the dead at the grave and then some offerings were given, such as bail-*amphoras*, *hydriai*, *alabastroi*, *lekythoi*, or even small animals and birds, especially fowls, and shells.<sup>10</sup> Also, the moment of laying the coffin into the grave would probably have involved women lamenting.<sup>11</sup> After the conclusion of the burial service, men and women had to leave the cemetery separately, and every group had a specific duty: it was probably the men who completed the construction of the tomb whilst women would return to the house of the dead in order to prepare the banquet which was to be held in his honour.

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<sup>5</sup> *Il.* 6.499f.; 18.51 and 316f.; 22.430 and 476; 23.10; 24.665, 747 and 761.

<sup>6</sup> *Poll.* 4.75 refers to the use of this instrument in connection with the lamentation.

<sup>7</sup> *Plut. Sol.* 21; see also Alexiou, M., *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Hearse in Muller-Karpe 1962, 66. *Abb.* 20. 4-5 and 21.9-10. cart in Hampe 1960, *Abb.* 46; Andronokos 1968, pl. 4a; KB pl. 16; Vermeule 1979, ch. 1 fig. 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Pl. Lg.* 7.800e. *Poll.* 4.75. Caria is a historical region of the Middle East, in the South-West of Turkey. The people of the Carian spread in Cyclad and Chreta from the eighth century BC. This passages suggest that music during funerals probably sounded 'different' to a Greek ear.

<sup>10</sup> For more about shapes and uses of the pottery in ancient Greece see Beazley, J.D., *Greek Vases, Lectures by J.D. Beazley*, 1989, Oxford; Arias, P.E., Hirmer, M. and Shefton, B.B., *A History of Greek Vase Painting*, 1962, London.

<sup>11</sup> Garland, R., *The Greek Way of Death*, pp. 35-37.

The lament was not only an expression of grief when a person died but also had an important role in religion: it was an essential element of particular rites. It is not possible here to examine all the cases in which laments were performed and so two examples have been chosen: the festivals devoted to Adonis and Hyakinthos.<sup>12</sup> Both were minor figures in comparison with other Olympian deities. Their cults were geographically, chronologically or socially marginal,<sup>13</sup> and they represented a religiosity limited to specific necessities. This suits the current purpose of merely introducing the lament as a feature of religious rites.<sup>14</sup>

The lament was a significant element of the yearly festivals held in Lesbos around the seventh century BC in honour of Adonis, one of the most famous gods of Asian origin. The rituals were performed predominantly by women and, unlike many other festivals, no authority presided over them. Numerous sources make reference to the characteristics of festivals celebrating Adonis: for example, women in Athens met in groups and bewailed his death. They commemorated it by carrying pots of sprouted seeds up onto the rooftops of their houses, in reference to how he had been laid in a bed of lettuce by Aphrodite as he was dying. They then laid out small images (*eidola*)

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Adonis and his cults see Atallah, W., *Adonis dans la Litterature et l'Art Grecs*, 1966, Paris; Walton, F. R., "The date of the Adonia at Athens", (1938) *HTR*, 31 1, pp.65-72. On Hyakinthos see Haarhoff, T.J., "Hyacinthus Again" (1956) *CR*, 6 3/4, pp. 200-201; Mellink, M.J., *Hyakinthos*, 1943, Utrecht.; Mikalson, J.D., "Erechtheus and Panathenaia", (1976) *AJP*, 97 2, pp. 141-153.

<sup>13</sup> Adonis did not belong to the official religion, maybe because of his Asian origin. The Adonia were performed predominantly by women and were not organised by the state, but carried out by private individuals, in their own houses (*Men. Sam.* 38-46). Among the non-citizen body, prostitutes celebrated the Adonia, probably because, according to Diphilos, they saw Aphrodite as their particular patron (PGC v F49 (Theseus); PCG v F42 (Painter); *Alkiphron* 14.3, 14.8, cf. 10.1.). Also Hyakinthos' rituals belonged probably to an ancient cult, an antecedent to the Olympic deities and probably not originally from Greece. Tradition connects Hyakinthos with Apollo (Paus. III, 19, 5 and Philostratus *Imag.* I, 23 [24]), but there are other Hyakinthos' representations that describe him as a mature person – see the Amyklai stele (Edmonson, C.N., "A Graffito from Amyklai", (1959) *Hesperia*, 28 2, pp. 162-164). The tale of the love between Apollo and Hyakinthos may therefore be only a later embellishment. It is probable that the two sanctuaries devoted to Hyakinthos and Apollo were built in the same area in subsequent periods and their "geographical" nearness could have generated in collective fantasy the mythological love between them (see Fougeres, G., "Hyacinthia", in Ch. V. Daremberg – E. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, III I, 1900, Paris.).

<sup>14</sup> Other figures were ritually connected with the lament, like Dionysos, Demeter, Kore/Persephone, but in these cases the lament had many implications which cannot be explained in a general introduction to the issue. See Otto, W.F, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, 1995, Indiana University Press; Kerenyi, K., *Eleusis- archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, 1967, Princeton University Press; Zuntz, G., *Persephone: Three Essay on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia*, 1971, Clarendon Press University.

of Adonis as corpses for burial which were later carried in funeral processions as the participants conducted mock burial rites, beat their breasts and sang laments.<sup>15</sup>

Aristophanes (*Lys.* 392 ff, 395ff), Sappho (fr. 140, fr. 168) and the *Epitaphios for Adonis* attributed to Bion also all refer to the lament for Adonis. Firstly it had a choral structure: the girls of the *thiasos* participated in Aphrodite's grief for her beloved Adonis. In *Lysistrata*, for instance, we read at 395-396: "the gipsy woman on the roof says 'beat your chest for Adonis'". This means that it was not just one person who was involved in the lament but a group of women, as the invitation to beat themselves during the lamentation implies. Secondly, the lament had an antiphonal structure: one person led the song and the choir of mourners reproduced her gestures and words. Evidence for this responsorial nature of the lament is the presence of formulas like *Ai ai Adonis* and the refrain repeated throughout the *Epitaphios for Adonis* as an echo to the dirge for Adonis.<sup>16</sup>

Another hero to whom a lament was ritually devoted in Amyclae, a village close to Sparta, was Hyakinthos. Unfortunately we have no information about the specific musical features of this lament but, nevertheless this case is an interesting one. In fact the analysis of it, in particular its context, provides evidence that the lament did not necessarily have to be connected with death. In the previous examples, the lament seems clearly associated with the deceased, whether the recipient was a real person or a mythological hero. Adonis was mourned because he was killed by a boar while hunting, but the legend of Hyakinthos' death described by Euripides seems to have been a later alteration to the original cults. The cult of Hyakinthos appears to have originally been disconnected from the legend of his metamorphosis into a flower and was probably created because of the geographical proximity of two sanctuaries, one devoted to Hyakinthos and the other to Apollo.<sup>17</sup> The presence of the lament in the

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<sup>15</sup> Plut. *Alc* 18.5; *Nik* 13.11; for the *eidola* see also Phot., Suid. s.v. *Adonia*, Hsch. s.v. *Adonidon keroi*, also EM s.v. *Adonidasmon*, *Adonin*.

<sup>16</sup> At vv. 1-5 see: "I mourn Adonis, "Fair Adonis is dead!"/ "Fair Adonis is dead" the Loves mourn in reply./ Sleep no longer, Cypris, in crimson-dyed sheets;/ wake, wretch, and black-robed loudly beat/ your breast and tell to all, "Fair Adonis is dead!" (Reed, J.D., *Bion of Smyrna – The Fragments and the Adonis*, / edited with introduction and commentary by J.D. Reed, 1997, Cambridge).

<sup>17</sup> Pausanias (III, 19, 5) and Philostratus (*Imag.* I, 23 [24]) recount that one day, as Apollo was teaching Hyakinthos to throw the discus, Zephyrus decided to take action: either from a desire to help the youth's discus fly further than Apollo's, or from jealous spite. The West Wind blew hard upon

rites of the cult of Hyakinthos therefore poses many questions. What was the lament performed for? Was it originally another type of song rather than a lament? Was it a song connected with something different from the passage from the life to the death? Frazer describes some cults as symbols of the vegetation-cycles: some deities and heroes would be the personification of the seed and their death was therefore the symbol of agricultural practices.<sup>18</sup> This is a somewhat dated analysis but it does offer one possible explanation. The lament, therefore, could have been not only a song connected with the funeral (real or ritual), but could have had further meanings which were bound to other aspects of social life. It is not possible to discuss this issue fully here, but the idea that the lament was not solely associated with death is one that deserves further attention in future studies.

One example of a lament which hides other aspects of social life behind its generally accepted nature as a lament is the *linos*. Greek literature is rich with references to a character whom we know by the name of Linos. Traditionally he is believed to have been the father of a particular kind of lament, but it is also important to consider both the possibility that this figure may have been invented at a later time, (possibly when the original meaning of the word had been lost over time), and that it may not have been originally or exclusively a genre of lamentation.

In Homer's *Iliad* (18.565–572) a vivid and realistic picture of the vintage (the gathering of grapes for making wine) is described among the decorations on Achilles' shield. The presence of the *linos*-song as a melody which accompanied the work of the vintage leads us to infer that *linos* was not to be considered here as a person but a gently sung and very pleasant melody.<sup>19</sup> It was unlikely to simply have been a form of entertainment but, because of the choral participation, it seems it was an essential part of a custom. The *linos* was not considered by Homer to be a lament. There are several

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the discus, and it struck Hyakinthos and killed him. In his grief, Apollo changed the boy into a flower.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Frazer, J.G., *The Golden Bough- A Study in Magic and Religion*, 1922, Abridged, New York.

<sup>19</sup> "Girls and cheerful boys were carrying the honey-sweet fruit in woven baskets, and in the midst of them a boy played lovely music on his clear-sounding phorminx, and sang the beautiful *linos*-song in a piping voice. The others followed him, stamping in unison, skipping on their feet with singing and joyful shouts" (Barker, A., *Greek Musical Writings*: I, 1984, p. 23).

important descriptions of funerals or lamentations for the dead in his poems,<sup>20</sup> and on such occasions we can find words like *goos* and occasionally *threnos*, but never *linos*.

Hesiod (fr. 305) was the first to refer to a person named Linos, but there is only a small reference to his existence. In this fragment we can deduce some important features of the *linos*: it was sung chorally and during some specific occasions, namely some feasts called *eilapinai*. In other passages (Hom. *Il* 18 490 ff, h. Hom. *In Vestam* 1-5, E. *Med.* 193) these were portrayed as occasions of joy and feast, where libations were poured, songs were performed, and every grief forgotten. The other feature mentioned by Hesiod (in Cl. Alex. *Str.* 1 4 25), which was Linos' expertise in every kind of knowledge, is far from a specific explanation about who Linos was. This vagueness may indicate that there was indeed a lack of awareness about the meaning of the word.

The *linos* began to be conceived as a lament in tragedy,<sup>21</sup> where it was referred to as *ailinos*. It appears like a song sung with passion and strength, contrasting to the gentle song of birds, and probably originated in Asia.<sup>22</sup> In Euripides' *Hercules* (348ff), for instance, the *ailinos* is accompanied by a joyful dance and by the music of the *kithara*. Even though the tragedy is focused on the danger that Heracles' family are running from because of his death, the context of the song here is a feast for the successful deeds of the hero. Euripides' *Helen* (167 ff) laments her sad fate: her *eidolon* (image) is the cause of the Trojan war and of the unnumbered dead in both the armies; her mother Leda has hanged herself for the shame of an unfaithful daughter; her brothers, the strong Dioscuri, according to some rumours, have killed themselves because of their sister; and her beloved husband Menelaus has disappeared.<sup>23</sup> What can she do apart from invoke the Sirens (the winged maids) to soothe her grief and to make her *kakon ailinon* more delicate with the help of appropriate instruments like the Libyan lotus (probably an *aulos*), the *syrinx* and the *phorminx*? The *ailinos* therefore appears as an aggressive lament rather than a delicate mourning. This feature cannot be

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<sup>20</sup> See the lament of Briseis in *Iliad* 19 vv 287-300; the funeral of Patroclus in *Iliad* 18 vv 315ff; the lament for Hector in *Iliad* 22 vv 416ff and his funerals *Iliad* 23 vv 718ff.

<sup>21</sup> Aesc., *Ag.* 121; 138; 159; Soph., *Aj.* 624 ff; E., *Her.* 348 ff; E., *Hel.* 167 ff 1161; E., *Ph.* 1515 ff; E., *Or.* 1395 ff.

<sup>22</sup> See E. *Or.* 1395 ff: ““*ailinon*, *ailinon* the outlanders say at the beginning of their lament, ah me, in Asian accents, when kings' blood is shed on the ground by the murderous sword of iron”.

<sup>23</sup> Teucer gives this information to her (134-150).



undervalued if examined in relation to the previously described examples: in particular, with the passages that describe the *linos* as a song performed in contexts of excitement, and especially within later literature (see below).

From an analysis of later sources it is possible to deduce that the word *linos* did always designate a lament.<sup>24</sup> References without fanciful and unrealistic stories about the musician called Linos are rare, but some testimonies hide significant information about the relationship of the song with the cult of Dionysos. Beside the examples from Homer and Hesiod (of the vintage and the *eilapinai*), there is another context implied by Diodorus Siculus. In his *Bibliotheca Historica*- (3 59 6 – 7 ,67 1-4) the *linos* is a song about the first Dionysos' deeds. Moreover, since the third century BC (D.Laert. V. Ph. 1 1 3; 1 4 1) Linos started to be considered as a *sofos*, a cosmologist, in the same way as Orpheus and Mousaios. Linos may have been connected with the Orphic rites, and specifically the Bacchic ones, which might explain the bond with death and the lament.

In order to address the issue of which cult devoted to Dionysos the *linos* belonged to, there is an interesting fragment in the work of Athenaeus of Achaeus, who was a younger poet than Sophocles and is known for his satyr plays.<sup>25</sup> The play has some *satyrikoi* among the characters and one of these is called *linos satyrikos*.<sup>26[26]</sup> The surprising presence of a satyr named Linos causes us to consider the relationship of the *linos*-song with the satyr play, and links it with the cult of Dionysus. As both literature and iconography show, the satyrs were the legendary followers of the deity, so why would one of these satyrs be called Linos? The presence of this name suggests that the song itself could have had a Bacchic context, maybe that of the vintage. In one satyr play by Achaeus, the characters, and in our case Linos, did not lose their insolence and their love of wine, as can see in a vase painting from the period between 530 and 520 BC (Wurzburg L 265; see image here: <http://old.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?lookup=1992.09.0396>)

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<sup>24</sup> Including: Hdt. *Hist.* 2 79 3 ; Paus. *Gr. D.* 9 29 6 ; Ps.-Plut. *De Mus.* 1132 A 5.

<sup>25</sup> D. Laert. 2, 5, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Ath. *Deipn.* 15 6 25.

Iconography may provide a further insight into what the *linos* was believed to be and the kind of occasions with which it was associated. In the pictured example, we see a scene generically described as ‘the vintage’ where the main characters are the satyrs. We should anticipate that such scenes were not only imaginary and felt to be mythological, but that they may also have reflected an aspect of real life. The satyrs may potentially have been enacted by the vine-growers who used masks, danced and sang a song accompanied by the *aulos*. It seems reasonable to conjecture that in this instance the song is the *linos* as it displays the relevant features.

There are many other issues concerning the *linos*-song and the lament in general. This article has introduced just some of the significant examples of this musical genre. Although primary sources and their use can be controversial when music and musical features are involved, a nuanced reading of a variety of material uncovers the relevance and significance of the wider social meaning of the ritual lament.

### **Abbreviations**

*AJP* = *American Journal of Philology*

Alk. = Alciphro, Ed. M. A. Schepers Leipzig (T.) 1905

*CR* = *Classical Review*

*EM* = *Etymologicum Magnum*

*HTR* = *Harvard Theological Review*

*PCG* = *Poetae Comici Graeci*, ed. R. Kassel-C. Austin

*QUCC* = *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*

*ZPE* = *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

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