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Post-mortem Photography as Memory, Mourning and Material Evidence in Late 19th–Early 20th Century Greek Archives

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Abstract:

Purpose — *This paper focuses on post-mortem photographs that had been produced in Greece between the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, either from Greek or foreign photographers. The photographs examined are included in museums and public photographic archives as well as private collections in Greece and they are examined as a memento and as a piece of documentation. The aim of this study is to shed light both on the literal and symbolic implications of post-mortem photography in Greece and thus to document and critically examine the photographs through the historical, social and cultural conditions of the period in which they were created.*

Design/methodology/approach — *This study employs a qualitative methodological framework, aiming to explore and interpret post-mortem photography as a socially constructed phenomenon. Emphasis is given on the critical examination of the visual and symbolic dimensions of the photographic representation of the dead body as well as on the cultural narratives that underpin this photographic practice. The study is grounded in original archival research, direct visual analysis and comparative study of the photographic material and the documentary evidence. It is also complemented by a comprehensive literature review in the fields of art history and cultural studies.*

Findings — *The findings of this study extend beyond the mere documentation of photographic archives, offering an in-depth analysis of societal attitudes toward the deceased and broader perceptions of death during the period under consideration.*

Originality/value — *This study constitutes an original research endeavor derived from the author's independent investigation. Given that post-mortem photography in Greece has not been yet fully studied, the aim of this work is to contribute to the existing body of research on Greek photography, as well as to the scholarly research of Greek photographic archives.*

Index Terms — Post-mortem photography, Greek photographic archives, funeral photography, 19th century photography, visual representation of death, archival research.

I. Introduction

Taking a photograph often stems from a desire to create an archive. There is a strong connection between photography, memory and the archive as the evidentiary power of photography is indisputable. This power is especially evident in memorial post-mortem photography, where images function as records that preserve the memory of the deceased and provide a means of remembrance within personal and collective archives.

In Greece, the visual representation of death is approached with ambivalence, reflecting broader tensions between tradition and modernity. While post-mortem photography is attracting increasing interest among researchers, the field remains largely underexplored, with no systematic studies to date. Despite this gap, a significant corpus of post-mortem photographs survives, spanning from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. These images, located in photographic and historical archives as well as in private collections, constitute valuable material evidence for examining practices of mourning, memory-making, and visual culture in modern Greek society.

II. The Value of the Photographic Image as a Carrier of Meaning

Interest in the study of images and their historical significance within academic research has been steadily increasing over the past two decades. This growing trend reflects shifting approaches to the production of knowledge, as the relationship between theory and practice, image and truth, is being re-evaluated [1]. Within this context, photography holds a particularly significant position, having attracted scholarly interest due to its crucial relationship between the subject and its representation. Interpreted as an imprint of visible reality, photography emerges as a reliable, authentic, and indisputable document. From this perspective, it is not merely regarded as another form of visual representation, but rather as "a practical realization of objectivity and detachment" [2].

Beyond photography, images in general constitute

immaterial, meaning-bearing objects that possess the ability to convey messages more persuasively than verbal language. As Fahmy, Bock, and Wanta note, "because they often operate through emotional and subconscious processing, images elicit a stronger and more immediate response than text, as they do not rely on the logic inherent in written language, but rather on instinct and emotion to generate meaning" [3]. This emotional activation becomes even more intense in the case of photographic depictions, particularly those capturing traumatic or shocking events. The viewing of such images can provoke an immediate and strong emotional response, rendering photography not only a carrier of information but also a powerful medium of emotional reception [4]. Therefore, photography is not considered a neutral or passive form of recording, but rather a bearer of meaning, capable of profoundly influencing human experience through its emotional power.

III. Post-Mortem Photography: Origins and Evolution

One of the most emotionally charged photographic subject one can capture is the deceased human body. There is no doubt that the mere sight of a dead person evokes emotions such as grief, pain, and discomfort over loss; feelings that contemporary Western societies, with their ideals of beauty and eternal youth, struggle to manage.

Photography in the 19th century included the depiction of various aspects of life, although the vast majority of photographs primarily captured either natural landscapes or people. Since its beginning in 1839, photographic practice has included the photographing of the dead among its applications, as death -being an integral part of life- could not be excluded from this emerging trend of documenting the surrounding reality. According to thetestimony below, one of the earliest attempts in photographic representation may have been the photographing of a deceased person. In October 1839, shortly after the official presentation of the invention of photography, Dr. Alfred Donné, experimenting with the new daguerreotype technique, sent a sample of his images to the French Academy of Sciences. In his letter, he wrote: "I have the honor of sending you some new images made using the daguerreotype method, which I submitted, as initial trials, to the Academy. I have already achieved a great result by capturing the image of a dead man." Unfortunately, no trace of this daguerreotype has been found [5]. This early documentation of photographing a dead person highlights not only the connection of photographic practice with death from its very beginning, but also the cultural context within which it was received. In the early 19th century, people did not regard death as something macabre, as is often the case today, but rather as an inevitable, expected, and perhaps even welcome condition within the natural cycle of life.

The photographing of the deceased began with the aim of capturing the facial features of those departing from life, so that their relatives could have a photograph of them as a keepsake. As a practice, it must be viewed and interpreted under the light of social beliefs surrounding death and mourning, as well as the expectations of the deceased's relatives of the time. In the early years, very few people had managed to obtain a photographic portrait of themselves. The newly invented art form had not yet become widespread, and the only means of representation previously available was a painted portrait.

Consequently, the post-mortem photograph was the one and only depiction of the deceased; it was simultaneously their first and last portrait, which remained within the family as a memento. The essential function of such an object is, after all, to preserve the memory, since the keepsake primarily serves to activate an imaginary representation of the object or an experience associated with it. In this sense, it constitutes a private image, accessible only to the subject to whom it is addressed. Moreover, the photograph also served as a family heirloom, bequeathing the facial features and memory of the deceased to future generations.

In the early photographic period (1840-1880), post-mortem photographs were mostly close-up portraits depicting only the upper torso of the deceased. Also, photographers often tried to create the impression that the subject was still alive and merely sleeping. In the years coming, people's needs as well as the photographic style changed, so other photographic types in post-mortem portraits appeared, such as the funeral photography.

Apart from the photographic techniques employed by practitioners, the content of the images themselves was even more noteworthy. It is quite notable that a significant number of early post-mortem portraits depicted children.

It was not uncommon for parents to be photographed holding their deceased children in their arms.

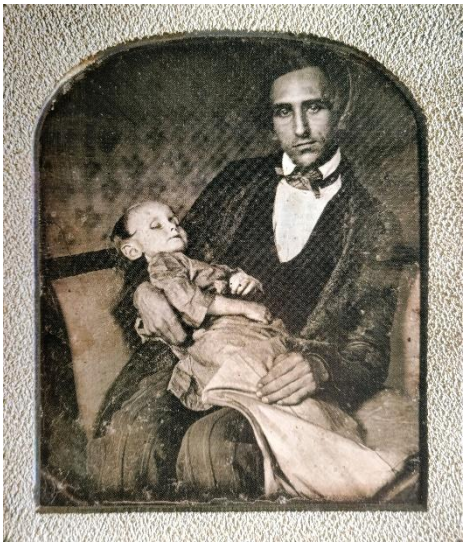

Fig. 1. *Father and deceased son, c.1844, daguerreotype, The Thanatos Archive*.

Typically, the photographer posed the parents in a manner that conveyed the sorrow and grief they felt. At times, however, their pain was expressed through the complete absence of emotion in their utterly expressionless faces. In most cases, the child's eyes were either fully closed, a clear indication that the image was taken post-mortem [6].

The frequent depiction of children in early post-mortem

photographs cannot be understood in isolation from the historical and social conditions of the period. This particular emphasis on child mortality largely reflects the sanitary and demographic realities of the 19th century, especially in the rapidly developing urban areas of Europe. Specifically, in England in 1840, 15–20% of children died before reaching their first birthday. These child mortality rates only began to reverse shortly before World War I, as a result of improvements in living conditions within cities [7]. An important factor for capturing deceased children is the strong likelihood that many of them had not been photographed during their lifetime; so their parents would not have any likeness of them.

Information The high mortality rate of the general population, combined with the rapid and accessible solution offered by photographic portraiture -as opposed to painted portraits- contributed significantly to the spread of post-mortem photography, a practice that persisted into the early decades of the 20th century. This expansion is reflected not only in the growing demand for post-mortem portraits but also in the systematic commercial promotion of the practice. The French photographer Achille Quinet, coming to Greece in 1851, advertised his work, including, amongst others, the photography of the dead: *«Εἰκόνες φωτογραφικαί, ἀναλλοίωται μετὰ ἢ ἄνευ χρωμάτων ἀπὸ δύο δίστιλα μέχρι τῶν ὀκτὼ ὑπὸ τοῦ κ. Κινέ Παρισινοῦ… Ἔτι δὲ κατασκευάζει καὶ εἰκόνας τεθνεώτων».* "Photographic images, altered with or without colour from two trays to eight by Mr. Quinet from Paris. He also makes images of the deceased" [8].

IV. Familiarity with Death in the 19th Century

The spread of post-mortem photography during 19th century was not restricted to a single geographic region but took on an international dimension, including the United States of America, Canada, Europe, European colonies and North Africa as early as the 1840s [9]. In particular, the widespread acceptance of post-mortem photography in Victorian England was not merely a consequence of mourning etiquette, but was embedded in a broader cultural context where death constituted an integral part of daily experience. Thus, people honored their feelings for the deceased through jewelry, clothing and photography. Furthermore, "in Great Britain, post-mortem photography developed rapidly, both as part of the broader commercial photographic applications that were spreading like wildfire and as a component of the general commercial boom in the country" [9]. The continuous development of this practice is also evidenced by photographers who advertised it as a service. Additionally, for several decades -from 1850 to 1930- special albums and cases for the preservation and display of post-mortem photographs were made available by photographers [9].

Subsequently, societies during that era deeply incorporated the social dimension of death. Mourning customs and accompanying rituals were widely accepted and served as a means to pay proper respect to the deceased. The most common etiquette practices involved changes in clothing and certain daily habits. In England, the United States, and Canada an entire industry related to death had developed early on, encompassing specific mourning clothes and accessories, pins and jewelry made from the hair of the deceased, specialized objects for embalming bodies, and behaviors associated with mourning [10].

Fig. 2. *Daguerreotype case, Fotography Museum, Antwerp.*

Fig. 3. *Mourners dressed in black, tintype, 1886, The Thanatos Archive.*

V. Post-Mortem Photography as a Memento

During The incorporation of death into the daily life of 19th century societies was not limited to clothing practices or material mementos but extended to the artistic and emotional representation of loss. Within this context, post-mortem photography emerged as one of the most distinctive cultural artifacts of the era, reflecting not only societal attitudes toward mourning but also deeper Romantic sensitivities concerning the memory of the deceased. More specifically, post-mortem photography, as a common practice within mourning rituals, developed during 19th century as a manifestation of Romanticism and its defining features, such as melancholy, emotional excess, and a spiritual detachment from the earthly realm. One of the

primary functions of photographing a deceased person was the therapeutic effect it offered to the bereaved left behind, while simultaneously confirming the death to relatives who were far away. But above all, it offered relatives the possibility to keep the memory of the deceased alive in their minds [11]. It would not be an overstatement to claim that a photograph, more than any other material medium, enhances the act of memory recall. An image always conveys something of the person it depicts and as Roland Barthes notes: "...it may not be reality, but at least it is its perfect analogy" [12].

This new photographic trend was reinforced by the prevailing atmosphere of familiarity with death, which was largely shaped by the religious beliefs of the period. In the 19th century, children were taught that death was a passage to a better world where they would reunite with their loved ones who had passed away [13]. Post-mortem photography became so popular that by the late 19th century, almost every family owned a photographic portrait of a deceased relative. "For some, post-mortem photography is a Victorian whim, the product of a particular mindset about death that no longer exists, while for others, its existence today is an enigmatic relic" [14]. However, neither of the two views is as close to the simple truth that post-mortem photography was both a photographic and a social product, perfectly compatible with the prevailing cultural atmosphere of its time.

In terms of technical developments in photography, from 1880 onwards, the replacement of the wet collodion process by the dry collodion process and silver gelatin print [15], allowed people to be photographed easily and quickly during their lifetime, and gradually photography became accessible in almost every household. During the 1850s and 1860s, several methods for dry collodion photographic capture and printing were proposed by chemists and scientists. In 1862, Sutton published details of a "rapid drying process" based on the tannin method. The "instantaneous" images were taken using the dry collodion method, although the short exposures with dry collodion likely required considerable skill and a lot of luck. In 1864, W.E. Bolton and E.J. Sayce announced a significant development: a process involving the mixing of silver bromide into collodion to form an emulsion. This was the first practical photographic emulsion. From then on, many people owned at least one photographic portrait of themselves while being alive and thus the need for post-mortem photographs gradually decreased.

Also, at the dawn of the 20th century, human life expectancy had been steadily increasing, while social perceptions and beliefs about death and mourning were changing. Death was no longer regarded as a natural consequence of birth and living, as it had been in the past, but rather as an illness or disorder. Sociologist Lindsay Prior points out that death is no longer attributed to natural causes, such as aging, neglect or fortune, but is seen as the result of pathological conditions. The fact that dying has been relocated from home to the hospital reflects the dominant perception of it as a purely biological fact. An indication of this change is that, at the moment of dying, a doctor is usually called rather than a priest; a practice that reveals significant changes in the way society perceives human mortality [16]. A comparable perspective was articulated by the British painter Francis Bacon in 1962:

"Of course, what man does now is to deceive himself for a little while by buying a kind of immortality from the doctors, in his attempt to prolong life. In the same way, art today has become a kind of game through which one forgets — of course, you could say it was always like that, but today it is exclusively so" [17].

With the advent of the 20th century, the tradition of post-mortem photography began to gradually decline as it became less and less popular in modern Western societies, where a funeral portrait started to be seen as unnecessary and macabre.

VI. Post-Mortem Photography as a Piece of Documentation

During The function of post-mortem photography has, inevitably, evolved over time. From its original purpose—the visual documentation of the deceased and the recording of death itself—to its later, distinctly commemorative use, both photographers and the families of the deceased engaged with the medium with a variety of perspectives.

For many decades the primary function of post-mortem photography was commemorative. In its early years, post-mortem photography served to preserve the memory of the deceased's facial features, to capture the individuals who were often being photographed for the first and last time before being buried. James F. Ryder, one of the earliest photographers to engage in post-mortem portraiture and owner of a daguerreotype studio in New York State during the 1850s, recounts the plea of a grieving mother who implored: "Oh! sir, my child Armenia is dead, and I have no likeness of her; won't you come immediately and take her a picture" [18].

Moreover, photography, as a carrier of information, assumed the role of documentation, an undeniable proof of death. As Kostas Ioannidis claims: "Documentation has always been the central aim of photography—the accurate depiction of an event deemed significant enough to be recorded. Ideally, documentation should always depict, ideally even reflect." Since the 1960s, post-structuralist theorists have strongly criticized both the concept of documentation and the very notion of photographic reality. The documentary photograph, even in its most utilitarian forms, was re-examined as a constructed product, going beyond mere representation. John Szarkowski, drawing on American advertising photography of the 1960s and the work of Walker Evans, emphasized the descriptive nature of photography and its strong connection to the visible world, noting that its meaning is confined within the image itself—photography does not interpret, it merely shows [19].

All the elements that give meaning upon a post-mortem photograph are embedded within the image itself; thus, no additional documentation, prior knowledge, or imaginative

effort is required for the viewer to comprehend its content. The positioning of the deceased -whether laid on a bed or placed within a coffin, with hands crossed over the chest and eyes closed- as well as the objects surrounding him, all indicate the finality of death. The decorative elements and symbols commonly accompanying the deceased, such as the Cross [20], flowers and sometimes a religious icon, compose a universal narrative of human mortality. The Cross carries particular symbolic weight, as it is the universal emblem of Christ and Christianity—having appeared in Egyptian tombs long before the birth of Christ—and is associated with the salvation of the soul. It embodies a synthesis of opposites: the positive (vertical) with the negative (horizontal), life with death, and the spiritual (vertical) with the worldly (horizontal). Today, it remains a prominent symbol throughout the Christian world—both Catholic and Orthodox.

Although post-mortem photography was mostly established as a memento within the context of mourning, there have been several cases in which it has been used as evidence in criminal investigations, contributing to the resolution of crimes involving loss of life. It is likely that a number of photographers were engaged in the task of photographing corpses, under the law for anthropometry, began in 1906 [19]. A photograph of this kind was a documentary evidence within the context of police investigation.

VII. The Greek Photographic Archives

The study of Greek post-mortem photography is structured around the practice of photographing the deceased, as shaped by customs, beliefs, and traditions of modern Greece, as well as by the prevailing perceptions of death during that period. The practice was influenced by foreign traditions; as was the case with photography in general during that period. Greece, as a small agrarian country, established its own parameters in post-mortem photography. The initial focus on an individual post-mortem portrait -depicting the deceased without the presence of others- soon expanded to a group portrait, that included the whole family of the deceased. Nevertheless, whatever the circumstances, interest in post-mortem photography in Greece never was as popular as it was in modern Western societies, such as England and the United States. And so is the case nowadays concerning the scholar study of post-mortem photography. In contrast to the United States, where several databases exist, such as: The Thanatos Archive (https://thanatosarchive.com/), the Burns Archive (https://www.burnsarchive.com/) or the Post-mortem photography archive of the Williams Clement Library (https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/death-in-early-america/post-mortem-overview/) to name a few, in Greece we lack a systematic database. The number of relevant photographs held in museums and research institutions within the country is very small. Also, taboos around death in contemporary Greek society makes it even harder for the scholars to locate unknown post-mortem photographs; the majority of which remain in the possession of the deceased's family members (and it's hard to be located) or individual collectors who are passionate about this particular photographic genre.

It is a fact that post-mortem photographs are often destroyed by the descendants of the deceased, instead of being donated, for example, to a public archive [21]. In Greece, attitudes toward death and its visual representation remain ambivalent. Nevertheless, a noteworthy corpus of post-mortem photographs survives today, dating from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. These are either already known published photos that belongs to museums and research institutions or unpublished photographs from private collections. Most notable archives and collections are the followings: Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive-Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece (ELIA – MIET), National Historical Museum, Christos Kalemkeris Photography Museum of the Municipality of Kalamaria, Leventis Municipal Museum of Nicosia, the archive of Panagiotis Fatseas, a photographer from Kythera, the archive of Panos Iliopoulos, a photographer from Messinia, the archive of Leonidas Papazoglou, a photographer from Kastoria, private collections of Spyros Gaoutsis in Corfu, Nelly Pantazi in Corfu, Dimitrios Kasapidis in Xanthi and Platon Rivellis in Athens.

Concerning the Greek photographers that engaged in post-mortem photography, the most renowned were: Philippos Margaritis (1810–1892), Anastasios Gaziadis (1853–1931), Nikolaos Birkos (1854–1924), Manolis Megaloeconomos, and brothers Xenophon and Solon Vathis. Most of them owned private photographic studios either in Athens or in the provinces [22]. Although there isn't any records, photographing the deceased appears to have been a significant source of income for photographers of the period, many of whom—especially those in rural areas—were itinerant. According to Kostis Liontis, the photographer Giannis Karamanos, who worked in the Argolida region in the early 20th century, earned a good part of his income from photographing the deceased [23].

VIII. Main Categories in Greek Post-Mortem Photography

The categorization of post-mortem photographs in the Greek context follows trends introduced from abroad. The classification is based on whether the deceased is depicted alone or surrounded by other individuals. There are three categories of post-mortem photographs. The first two photographic types suggest that the deceased individual is not, in fact, dead. The first of them, known as the "last sleep", depicts the deceased as though peacefully sleeping, and is related to the religious belief of an afterlife.

The second type, is under the paradox title "alive, yet dead" and portrays the deceased in such a way that they appear to be alive. The third category which called "funeral photograph," is literally a group portrait of the deceased surrounded by family members.

Fig. 4. *Giorgos Moraitis, Post-mortem portrait of a boy, Athens, c.1870, private collection of Alkis Xanthakis*

Fig. 5. *Panagiotis Fatseas, Funeral of an old man (Karydi) in the island of Kythira, General State Archives, Greece, c.1930.*

As Jay Ruby notes in his comprehensive study *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*:

"There are some stylistic consistencies that appear to straightforwardly reflect cultural attitudes toward the dead and the rituals surrounding them. From 1840 until 1880, three styles of post-mortem photography emerged. Two types were designed to deny death, that is, to imply that the deceased was not dead, while a third variant portrays the deceased with mourners. These conventions should not be regarded as strictly chronological in that once established some continue to be employed to the present time. Changes in styles of representation that do occur at the turn of the century can be attributed to technical and social changes in funerary and burial customs" [18].

In the early years of photography, the primary reason for taking a portrait of a deceased person was to offer relatives a souvenir of their facial features; since it was very likely that no other photograph had been taken of the person during their lifetime.

The first type called "last sleep" -in which the deceased is depicted in a state resembling sleep- not only establishes a symbolic association between sleep and death, reminds us of the twin sons of Nyx, Hypnos and Thanatos, from classical Greek mythology [24], but promises an eternal life awaiting the individual beyond physical death. Thanatos (Death) and Hypnos (Sleep), twin deities in Greek mythology, symbolizing the close relationship between sleep and death. The association between death and sleep finds its roots in ancient Greek mythology, specifically in the figures of Hypnos and Thanatos. These twin brothers, sons of Nyx (Night) and Erebus (Darkness), were anthropomorphic deities who personified sleep and death, respectively. They were linked to a dark, unseen realm untouched by the light of the Sun.

In the second category, known as the "alive, yet dead" type, commonly located in the Western societies, an even more paradox depiction of the deceased is represented. Two key factors contributed to the development of this photographic type during the early photographic period. Firstly, there was a strong desire among individuals to obtain a commemorative image of their loved one in a lifelike state, particularly since very few people had portraits taken while still alive. Secondly, the lack of a distinct photographic identity during this period led many photographers to imitate the conventions of painting.

The third type, which appears frequently in Greek photography, is the one depicting the deceased in the coffin shortly before the funeral, thus is called "funeral photography". In this group portrait -featuring the deceased surrounded by relatives and many times members of the broader community- in contrast to the two previous types, there is no attempt to conceal the reality of death. On the contrary, death functioned as the occasion for a group portrait of the community, thereby affirming the profound sense of solidarity that prevailed within small communities during that period.

Fig. 6. *Leonidas Papazoglou, A dead student in his coffin surrounded by his classmates, Kastoria, Greece, c.1910-1920.*

All three photographic types have been located in every country where this practice emerged. Particularly, during the early photographic period (1840–1880), in the United States and Northern European countries photographers clearly portrayed the deceased as if they were alive. The main characteristics of this "alive, yet dead" type were the open eyes of the deceased, or the seated position in a chair or a couch. A very characteristic photograph, that comes from The Thanatos Archive, is the one that portrays a young boy laying in a couch with his hands crossed on his lap and his eyes wide open, yet void.

Fig. 7. *Post-mortem portrait of a boy with open eyes, c.1855, daguerreotype, The Thanatos Archive.*

Fig. 8. *Xenophon Vathis, Eleni Voulgari , daughter of Lazaros Kountouriotis, c. 1875, Athens, National and Historical Museum.*

In Greece, the "alive, yet dead" type was slightly different, the photographer would take the picture of the body and then turn the photograph 90 degrees so that it appeared to be upright and thus alive. Additionally, through appropriate processing, the face was often isolated to emphasize it more strongly. The post-mortem photograph of Eleni Voulgari, daughter of Lazaros Kountouriotis -currently archived at the National Historical Museum- is such a case. The photographer, Xenophon Vathis, who captured the image of the deceased, also wrote the caption in a vertical direction, so that the photo could be placed in that direction.

IX. Research in the Photographic Archives in Corfu

Throughout my research on post-mortem photography, I came into contact with individuals from various regions of Greece, such as Attica, Macedonia, Peloponnese and the Ionian islands. It is worth saying that in Corfu, people appeared to be particularly well-acquainted with the term post-mortem photography; the mere mention of the phrase was readily understood, requiring no further clarification. This phenomenon was unique throughout my whole fieldwork. Although the research conducted at the Corfu Reading Society and the General State Archives in Corfu did not yield immediate results, my interaction with the archivists led me to the location of post-mortem photographs coming from private collectors on the island.

One of the most striking post-mortem portraits I noticed during my whole research is an individual portrait of a young child, which comes from the private collection of Spyros P. Gaoutsis in Corfu.

Fig. 9. *Bartolomeo Borri, Post-mortem portrait of a child, Corfu, undated, private collection of Spyros P. Gaoutsis.*

Fig. 10. *Bartolomeo Borri, Post-mortem portrait of a child, Corfu, undated, private collection of Spyros P. Gaoutsis.*

The photograph belongs to the category "alive, yet dead" and depicts a young boy dressed in white garments, lying on a bed with hands crossed over the torso and flowers placed upon its body. The boy is photographed in a close-up that primarily captures the upper part of his body. The photograph is oriented vertically so that the body appears upright, perhaps in an effort to look as if it is a living child. The slightly open eyes and lips of the child support this idea. The image is a black-and-white silver mounted in a cabinet card [25]. The cabinet card was one of the most popular photographic formats of the 20th century, consisting of a photograph mounted on stiff cardboard, typically measuring 10.8 x 16.5 cm. Its most common subjects were individual or family portraits, and its name derives from the word cabinet

(referring to a parlor cabinet), as these photographs were often displayed atop such furniture. Cabinet cards were larger than cartes de visite (which measured 6.4 x 9.6 cm), as the depicted subjects needed to be clearly visible from any point within a room. This format eventually replaced the carte de visite (cdv), which was first introduced by André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri in Paris on 27 November 1854. On the back side, the photographer's logo is printed. The photographer is Bartolomeo Borri (1842–1924), of Italian origin, who owned a photography studio in Corfu from the 1860s onward. The studio, named Fotografico di B. Borri and was located at S. Spiridione Street No. 1122, as indicated on the back side of the photograph [31]. In 1875, Bartolomeo Borri participated in the third Olympic Exhibition, where he was awarded a bronze medal. In 1878, he exhibited his photographs at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. In 1890, his son Giuseppe Borri (1873–1931) joined the family studio, prompting a change in the business name to Borri & Figlio. In 1907, they received the "Grand Prize" at the International Exhibition in Bordeaux, and the enterprise remained active until 1943. On the reverse side of the cabinet card, the studio's name and address are printed within an ornate decorative frame.

There is no specific information regarding the exact date of the photograph; however, based on Borri's printed logo, it can be approximately dated after 1875. The printed medal on the reverse side of the card depicts King George I and was designed in 1875 for the Zappas Olympic Games. Its appearance as a decorative element in the logo of the Fotografico di B. Borri studio is likely linked to Borri's participation in the Zappeion Olympic Exhibition, where he may have received an award. The medal bears the following inscription on the one side: "ΑΓΩΝΟΘΕΤΗΣ ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ ΖΑΠΠΑΣ, ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑ ΑΘΗΝΗΣΙ και ΤΑΞΕΩΣ Α" (First-Class Award, Zappas Olympic Games, 1875) adorned with a laurel wreath and features the profile of King George I on the other side (https://getty.libguides.com/photography-greece-mediterranean/photographers)

Fig. 11. *Medal depicting King George I.*

The available evidence suggests that the child died sometime between 1875 and 1890, the year Bartolomeo Borri changed the name of his business to *Borri & Figlio* [8] and likely replaced the previous studio cabinet cards bearing the former name, with the new ones. Based on the child's outfit, it is assumed that they belonged to an upper-class family of Corfu [26]. No other post-mortem photograph by Borri has been located, making it difficult to identify his style in this photographic genre.

Such post-mortem portraits featuring open or half open eyes -commonly appeared during the early photographic period in England and the United States- have been identified only rarely in Greece. The open eyes of the deceased, apart from evoking unsettling emotions due to their vacant gaze, contradict Greek funerary traditions. Closing the eyes of the dead, a ritual known since antiquity, was among the first actions to be taken immediately after death and prior to burial, in order to ensure the release of the soul. Specifically, in ancient Greece, since the Homeric era, at the moment of a person's death, one of the first things to be done was to close eyes and mouth of the deceased. While this ritual may have served an aesthetic function, during the historical period it acquired eschatological meaning. As noted in an inscription discovered in Smyrna, likely dating to the 3rd century BC, it was believed that the closing of the eyes ensured the soul's release from the body. During the years of British rule (1814–1864), Corfu began to transform from a fortified town into an urban center, gradually acquiring the characteristics of a small capital city [27].

Portraits of deceased children represent a special category within post-mortem photography, as premature and unnatural deaths tend to trigger intense emotional reactions, often leaving behind a sense of absence and paradox. By the end of the 19th century, two out of every ten children died before the age of five. In the United States, for example, infant and child mortality rates in 1900 were significantly high. Furthermore, in the late 19th century, epidemics of Asiatic cholera, yellow fever, typhus, and plague contributed to high mortality rates even in the modernized states of Europe and North America. Moreover, infant deaths from unknown causes were often regarded as a tragic yet inevitable aspect of life [28].

Within the same collection of Spyros P. Gaoutsis, one more post-mortem photograph was located. The image depicts the Metropolitan Bishop of Corfu and Paxoi, Sebastianos Nikokavouras (1852–1920), who was active from 1899 until 1920. His funeral took place at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Corfu in July 1920. The deceased cleric is depicted in a reclining position inside the coffin, dressed in full liturgical vestments and wearing the mitre, while holding both the episcopal staff and the Holy Bible in his hands.

The photographer focused primarily on the individual rather than the funeral event itself. The deceased is positioned diagonally within the photographic composition, guiding the viewer's gaze toward the focal point of the image, which is the face of the deceased. This image is not merely a record of death, but also a means through which the desired public image of the cleric is constructed. The staging of the body reflects socially and symbolically charged practices. Through such practices, the Church seeks to shape a narrative that reinforces the hierarchical authority of the deceased Archbishop.

Fig. 12. *Post-mortem portrait of Metropolitan Archbishop of Corfu and Paxoi Sevastianos Nicokavouras, 1920, Corfu, private collection of Spyros P. Gaoutsis.*

One more post-mortem photograph located during my research in Corfu depicts an elderly man lying on his deathbed, captured in profile, with only the upper part of his body visible. This photograph belongs to the photographic archive of the Jewish community, housed in the General State Archives of Corfu. According to the archivist, Nelli Pantazi, the deceased man was likely Jewish. However, this is highly questionable, as Jewish custom strictly prohibits the public display of the dead—let alone their photographic representation. Post-mortem photographs were also been sought at the Jewish Museum of Greece; however the officials informed us about the strict rules of the Jewish death rituals, and as expected, the museum's collection contains no such material. Consequently, the identity of the deceased man remains unknown.

Fig. 13. *Post-mortem portrait of a man, undated, General State Archives, Corfu.*

X. Conclusion

This article seeks to highlight the significance of Greek post-mortem photography as a testimony to the social, cultural, and religious practices surrounding death. Despite the limited number of photographs, the restricted public access to such material, and the scarcity of relevant literature, these images offer valuable insights into perceptions of death during the modern Greek period. The experience of this research revealed that in nearly every region of rural Greece, scattered post-mortem photographs exist, patiently awaiting the appropriate opportunity to emerge from obscurity.

Post-mortem photography emerged as a complex social and cultural phenomenon of the 19th century, reflecting contemporary attitudes toward death, memory, and representation. From its initial function as a memento until the lately use as a means of cultural expression, the photographic depiction of the deceased reveals the ways in which societies sought to come into terms with the inevitability of human mortality. The gradual decline of the practice during the 20th century aligns with the deathcare from the family home to the professionalized settings of funeral homes, reflecting deeper transformations in worldviews and social values.

XI. References

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