

# Romans called death a 'debt of nature'

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The new year began with the death of a dear friend. A week later David Bowie died, and Alan Rickman only a few days after that, both still in their sixties. And that wasn't the end of celebrity deaths. Soon I dreaded turning on the radio in the morning. During the long, dark nights, thoughts of death and mortality lurked in every corner of my mind, just waiting to pounce. I needed to defend myself, so I turned to words – a language-lover's homeopathic medicine.

The ancient Romans had many expressions and words for death and dying – one phrase was “abiit ad maiores” (he or she has gone to the ancestors); and they described death as a debt of nature (“debitum naturae”). The Latin “moriōr” (die) and “mors” (death) are the source of our English mortal, mortality. Since dying isn't always a simple withering away, the Romans increased their vocabulary with such words as “perire” (the root of our perish) or “cedere” (from which we derive the suffix –cide, as in homicide, suicide; the verb “decedere” is the root of decease). “Funus”, the source of our word funeral, means death or corpse as well as funeral in Latin.

The English words for dying, death, dead ultimately have Germanic origins. Old English, like Latin, had various expressions signifying death. One that survives to our day is to give up the ghost. Ghost comes from the Old English “gast”, meaning spirit or soul, in other words life. Another Old English word for die is “steorfan”. It's the source for the German verb to die (“sterben”) and also for the English verb starve - in medieval England “steorfan” meant to die from hunger, cold or disease. At the base of “steorfan” is the meaning to be rigid, stiff – and that (if you'll permit a little black humour) is the

source of stiff signifying corpse, North American slang dating back to the 1850s and often heard in gangster films from the Twenties and Thirties.

Western societies parted from their dead in different ways. In ancient Rome, bodies were normally cremated (from the Latin “cremare”, burn), while in other European cultures they were laid to rest in a grave (from the Old English “græf”), tomb (from the Greek “tumbos”) or crypt (from the Greek “kruptos”, hidden). Often the dead are placed in a coffin, a Middle English word meaning box, ultimately deriving from the Greek “kophinos”, basket.

The coffin is carried to the place of burial by a hearse, a word that has a complex etymology. It entered the language via Anglo-Norman French, where “herce” was the word for a triangular harrow, used in agriculture. In Middle English the word became “herse” and referred to a frame, triangular like the agricultural tool, but now holding candles, and placed over the coffin of a distinguished person. Eventually hearse was extended to mean the bier, or frame, on which the coffin was carried to the grave, and, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the vehicle transporting the coffin.

Hundreds, even thousands, of years have passed and transformed these words, but the sentiments associated with death – “debitum naturae” – remain unchanged.