

Was Death Celebrated or Feared in the Middle Ages?

In the Middle Ages death was ever-present. Surrounded by war, famine, and disease, medieval men and women confronted the temporality and corruptibility of life, constantly. Death is a looming shadow before all of us, but did the medieval ethos fear it? Or did they celebrate it with their abundance of shocking and macabre art? We will evaluate how Christianity is fundamentally intertwined with dying in the Middle Ages and how it influenced the view of death. We will then go on to discuss the proliferation of '*Ars Moriendi*,' what made a 'good' death and how to prepare for it. Two examples of art will be presented in regard to the medieval fascination with the macabre. Finally, we will discuss how the church created an economy out of these beliefs.

Paul Binski says that the 'facts of medieval death were largely, if not entirely, Christian facts.'¹ The central act of the Christian faith—the resurrection of Christ—transformed death from an end to an interruption. The soul was immortal; it was the body that was subject to death. Only when abandoned by God did the soul die, as the body dies when the soul departs from it.² Personhood was linked inextricably to the idea of salvation, and thus death was a transformative stage symbolically similar to being born.

We leave the world as we enter it, naked, needy, and vulnerable, and so the rites of departure can resemble the rites of entry. Thus as we are washed and cleansed in death, so we are baptized at birth.³

In many ways, life on earth was a shadow of the true-life men were born into after death. Saints were viewed as still living even after they had died, transgressing 'between the realms of the quick and the dead, and it was they who enjoyed the light of reality and the quick who lived in the shadow of life.'⁴ Beyond that, the living, as well, could act on behalf of the dead, sending prayers to speed them along their journey to the afterlife. In this way, the living and the dead were interconnected. To the medieval Christians, death was an effect of first man's sin and was a punishment for it, yet this punishment by the grace of the Savior can be transformed into an act of virtue and righteousness.⁵ Not that it becomes 'a good thing,' says St. Augustine, but that 'death, which all agree to be the contrary of life, has become the means by which men pass into

¹ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 9.

² St. Augustine, 'Book XIII,' *City of God: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 510.

³ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 30.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ St. Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 513-514.

life.’⁶ In accordance with this, we see the shift of perspective on dying from the pre-Christian era. To the pagans, death was something unclean and something final. In a cyclical and inescapable perspective of time, what balanced out death for the pagans, was the triumph of earthly fame and reputation that lived on even after you died. For the Christians, life expanded into a history of sin, redemption, and salvation culminating at a designated time with the Last Judgement.⁷ It was a matter of destiny and salvation and emphasized the judgement of the soul. While there was dread and fear associated with death, there was also a sense of victory over it as exemplified by the triumphant verses in the *Canticle of the Sun*:

Praised be my Lord for our sister the death of the body, from whom no man escapeth... Blessed are they who are found walking by Thy most holy will; for the second death shall have no power to do them harm.’⁸

Here, again it is emphasized that the bodily death is not a thing to fear. If man is conformed to God’s will, a new life awaits him. One did not cease to exist at death, but continued, ‘in which case, what was there to fear from the dead?’⁹

Medieval man was not scared of the act of dying, so much as he feared not dying well. With the emphasis of death resting on the soul and its judgement having moved from the Second Coming and into ‘the bedchamber, around the deathbed,’¹⁰ it was imperative for men and women to enter a state of grace before death. A surprising death, one which caught you unawares, was a threat to that state. The craft of dying well or the ‘*Ars Moriendi*’ became a phenomenon in the latter Middle Ages, encouraging the idea of preparing for death. It was to teach and comfort, acknowledging the benefit for all Christians, laymen as well as religious men.¹¹ It compared death to an escape from prison; an end to exile.¹²

In the ideal death, the dying knew they were to die soon. The performance of the last rites was imperative; these pre-liminal rites given before the dying crossed the threshold of the living world into that of the next were concerned with ‘purification and separation.’¹³ These rites included confessing sins, receiving communion, the final unction, and temptation. But even as these rites—so closely interlinked with the concept of healing, if not the body, than at least the soul—were performed, there remained the hope that death would not come.¹⁴ Failing that, the

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 514.

⁷ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 24.

⁸ George Congreve, S.S.J.E., ‘Preface,’ *The Book of the Craft of Dying and Other Early English Tracts Concerning Death*, ed. Frances M. M. Comper (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1917), p. 19

⁹ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. and trans. by Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), (kindle), p. 33.

¹¹ Comper (ed.), *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, p. 3.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 29.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 30.

soul would depart in a state of grace. Even the direction the body faced held symbolic and religious weight. Both Launcelot and Iseult, when believing they were close to death, laid down pointing eastward.¹⁵ Guillaume Durand, Bishop of Mende, stressed the importance of lying with man's face looking up to heaven.¹⁶ Further, these rites were given by a priest to awaken a conformity in the dying to the will of God as he peacefully accepted his coming death.¹⁷ King Louis IX is an example of the good death:

The illness from which [King Louis] suffered began to take stronger hold on him. He asked for the sacraments of Holy Church, and received them with a clear mind and in full possession of his faculties, as was evident from the fact that while the priests were anointing him and reciting the seven special psalms he repeated each verse after them in turn.¹⁸

Similarly, St. Hugh of Lincoln instructed his chaplain to make a cross of ashes on the floor and lay him upon it,¹⁹ an act which Louis IX replicated seventy years later. A soul's fate was decided in the last hours of life and it was thought that a final temptation awaited you; if you succumbed, you would be damned to hell for eternity.²⁰ This was the death of the abandoned soul which Augustine wrote of. With such divine weight laid upon the state of preparation for death, it is little wonder that medieval man became preoccupied with the concept of memento mori and the macabre.

Memento Mori were reminders that death was ever-present. They ranged from transi tombs to macabre paintings which emphasized the reality that death came to all. Transi tombs emerged in the late 14th century. *Transi*, is most appropriately translated to 'gone off.'²¹ These tombs were carved with effigies of the deceased as a putrefied and decayed corpse. Some of the tombs exhibited the dichotomy of life and death by placing a carving of the perfected body of the person as they were in life and the decomposed cadaver of the deceased below it. One such tomb is that of Bishop Richard Fleming (d. 1431), located in Lincoln Cathedral. His tomb reads:

Stand, seeing in me, who is eaten by worms, what you will be. I, who was once young and beautiful to look on... lie under thick clods. Worldly pomp, honour, recognition, what heights there are, what they, pray, if not dreams, folly? ...All things are put to flight by

¹⁵ Airès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Comper, *The Book of The Craft of Dying*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Quoted in Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 36.

¹⁹ Comper, *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, p. 18.

²⁰ Arthur E. Imhof, 'Ars Moriendi: How to Live and How to Die,' *Historical Social Research*, 22, 1 (1997), p. 194 <<https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/20756130>> [accessed 1 January 2026].

²¹ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 139.

cruel death, like shadows... Brief life is vain, such glory has this end... Through this be wise.²²

Christina Welch proposes that these cadaver tombs portrayed the deceased in purgatory, reminding the living to pray for the dead, decreasing the pain and the time they spent in purgation.²³ Further, the sculpture used the decaying body as an exhibition of the inner sinfulness. What is interesting about these tombs is that they occur in northern Europe but not elsewhere. This coincides with the practice of covering the deceased, especially inside coffins, during funerary rituals. Where the face of the deceased was left unshrouded or where removing the body for ritual cleansing was practiced, such transi tombs do not occur, except for one or two exceptions. Binski stresses that 'what was concealed by social practice in the north was revealed through art; what was revealed by social practice in the south was concealed, or even repressed, by art.'²⁴ Whatever the case, they were an expression of the medieval fascination with the grotesque side of death. In shocking sentiment, Cardinal Jean de Lagrange (d. 1402), declares upon his tomb that the young and old should look upon his cadaver so,

that they might see to what state they will be reduced... Why are you proud? You are only ash, and you will revert, as we have done, to a fetid cadaver, food and tidbits for worms and ashes.²⁵

This is a call for self-reflection, provoked through extreme morbidity, calling those who looked upon transi tombs to ponder the annihilation of status, wealth, and material life that would come for all.

Another image popular in the Middle Ages was that of 'The Three Living and the Three Dead.' The one pictured below is from the De Lisle Psalter,²⁶ but variations of the painting proliferated throughout medieval Europe. It pictures three men—usually a count, duke, and king—in their youth, adorned in wealth and the symbols of their status. Based upon the legend, they meet three animated skeletons who warn them that 'what you are, that we were. What we are, that you will be.'²⁷

²² Christina Welch, 'English and Welsh Carved Cadavers: An Overview with Dr Christina Welch,' Churches Conservation Trust, (2021) < <https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/what-we-do/blog/english-and-welsh-carved-cadavers-an-overview-with-dr-christina-welch> > [accessed 19 December 2025], (para 3 of 9)

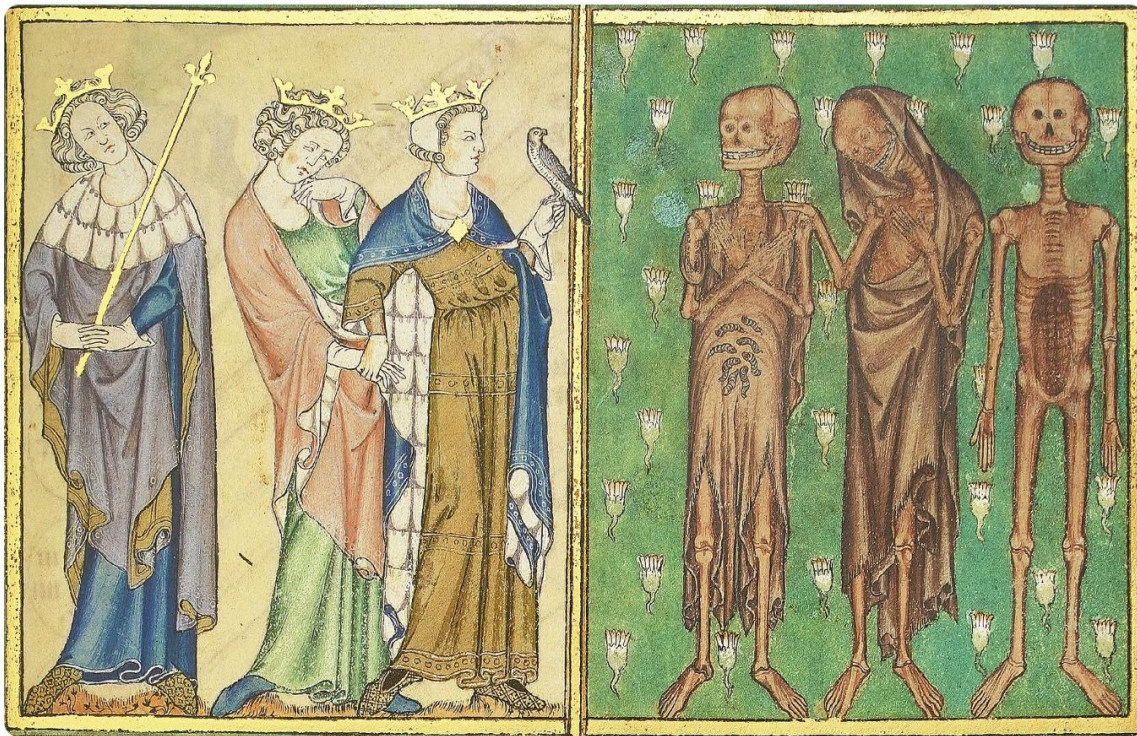
²³ *ibid.*, para 4 of 9.

²⁴ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 142.

²⁵ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 143.

²⁶ De Lisle Psalter, 'The Three Living and the Three Dead,' *Ziereis Fascimiles* (1310-20) <<https://www.facsimiles.com/blog-1/standard-titel>> [accessed 18 December 2025].

²⁷ *ibid.*, para 1 of 8.



De Lisle Psalter

FIG. 1. De Lisle Psalter, *The Three Living and the Three Dead*, (c. 1310-20)

The rejection of material status and identity, the warning that riches and power will not halt the coming of death are familiar. They are the themes of the transi tomb. In both examples of macabre art, the doubling of man in life versus man in death, reverses what is familiar into something uncanny and unfamiliar. It places us, as Binski says, into a *mise-en-abyme* (meaning 'placed in an abyss').²⁸ Here, the spectators are again forced by the unsettling depictions, to evaluate themselves. With all of these macabre subjects, from the *Ars Moriendi* to the transi tombs, comes the call to reform and save yourself from the damnation and purgation which surely awaited all who sinned.

Fear was a useful motivator for prompting people to turn to God and repent.²⁹ As mentioned above, it was important to prepare your soul for Judgement Day and it was popular to make

²⁸ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 138.

²⁹ Jyrki Nissi and Ines Testoni, 'Devotion to Saints as Medieval Death Anxiety Management,' *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, (2025) < <https://www.cambridge-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/core/journals/journal-of-ecclesiastical-history/article/devotion-to-saints-as-medieval-death-anxiety-management/91BC75C07F95EDE1FA29CD61E9029BC2> >

donations and give gifts to parish churches to ease your way through Purgatory.³⁰ Wealthy patrons could ensure the care of their souls by donating to the church in exchange for prayers. Mass could aid against the Last Judgment and intercede on your behalf, and many paid for a specific number of masses to be said in their memory once they passed. An economy of death emerged. Binski calls this balance between punishment and suffrages, 'the bookkeeping of salvation.'³¹ For example, Pope Innocent IV released those who financially donated to the rebuilding of Westminster Abbey from twenty days of penance and it became possible in the 14th century to buy plenary indulgences from a confessor at the moment of death, a trade which Pope Clement VI participated in.³²

Death to the medieval mind carried both fear and hope. Through Christian doctrine of the immortal soul and the triumph of Christ over death and sin, the true life was the one which began after man had passed on from this world. The medieval hope in achieving that true-life was balanced by their fear of dying in an uncleansed and unabsolved state which led to the proliferation of the '*Ars Moriendi*.' The desire to be prepared for the dying hour is mirrored in the fascination with macabre images that were constant reminders that none could escape death. Despite all these ideals, the church became an economy of suffrages and used the fear of death and punishment for material gain. Medieval views on death are complex, idealistic, and at their core, human in their fear and hope for salvation. Yet, mostly the theme which runs through the culture of the period is a relatable one: that death is inevitable and we will all succumb to it.

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³⁰ Karen Selway, and BBC Productions, *Churches. Episode 3, Medieval Death*, (London: BBC Worldwide, 2010), 23:30 <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/watch/medieval-death?utm_campaign=Video&utm_medium=MARC&utm_source=aspresolver> [accessed 1 January 2026].

³¹ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 187.

³² *ibid.*, p. 188.

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