

Was death celebrated or feared in the Middle Ages?

The medieval concept of death took shape through the lens of Catholic Christianity and, in the wake of the crises of the fourteenth century, 'haunted the medieval imagination'.¹ The nature of the livings' relationship with the dead was complex but also direct; medieval people 'were as familiar with the dead as they were familiarized with the idea of their own death'.² Far from something remote or invisible, death was a constant presence in medieval life, leading to what has been called 'the medieval death culture'.³ Scholars like Johan Huizinga saw this as symptomatic of a cultural decline in the Late Middle Ages,⁴ however recent studies suggest that this seemingly morbid fascination with death had a more nuanced and even celebratory dimension.⁵

Generally speaking, a "good" death in the Middle Ages was one in which the dying had time to prepare themselves for their 'transition from the community of the living to the community of the saved in the afterlife'.⁶ Being unprepared for death placed one's soul in danger and damaged social bonds with the living, leaving one 'in a liminal space, divorced from both communities'.⁷ Dying was a public ritual with the dying person themselves leading the proceedings, and it was attended by priests, doctors, friends, and family members.⁸ The role of

¹ Wendy J Turner, 'A Few Thoughts on the Dead, the Living, and Liminal Existence', in *Dealing with the Dead: Mortality and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Thea Tomaini (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2018), p. 393.

² Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. by Patricia M Ranum (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 25.

³ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 8.

⁴ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: The Folio Society, 1998), pp. 126–137.

⁵ Turner, pp. 393–396.

⁶ Jill Hamilton Clements, 'Sudden Death in Early Medieval England and the Anglo-Saxon Fortunes of Men', in *Dealing with the Dead*, p. 37.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, pp. 11–12.

the priest at the deathbed was to hear confession and offer extreme unction and communion, and the role of the dying person was to repent their sins and accept their departure from the material world with solemnity and grace.⁹ Paul Binski comments that these final rituals owe a great deal to early medieval monasticism: 'The death of a monk offered a model of communal solidarity – a monastery was a form of family – and so was an extension of the communal life'.¹⁰ Monasteries assumed the role of caretakers for the dead, and the spiritual rewards were great for laypersons who had the favour of a monastic house. This represented the beginning of a process that, by the twelfth century, had normalized clerical control of the rituals of death and remembrance.

Dying took on a legalistic character throughout the Middle Ages characterized by the 'suppressing of the eschatological time between death and the end of the world'.¹¹ One's final judgement no longer occurred at the Second Coming, but on the deathbed. Phillipe Ariès notes of the dying man depicted in the fifteenth century *Ars moriendi* (The Art of Dying): 'His attitude during this fleeting moment will erase at once all the sins of his life if he wards off temptation, or, on the contrary, will cancel out all his good deeds if he gives way. The final test has replaced the Last Judgment'.¹² This could be reflective of the highly legalistic character of the medieval Church, but it also represents the personal nature of religious devotion that developed during the thirteenth century.¹³ Death assumed a gravitas that had been previously absent, reinforcing the role played by the dying person in the ritual of their own death.¹⁴

The making of a will became more common throughout the period, and the putting in order of one's possessions was in itself a religious act that helped settle the soul.¹⁵ 'Almost invariably,

⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰ Binski, *Medieval Death*, pp. 32–33.

¹¹ Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, p. 33.

¹² Ibid., p. 37.

¹³ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 33.

¹⁴ Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 33.

the late medieval will begins by bequeathing the soul to God, then specifies the place of burial, and then often arranges for the funeral and for masses to be said for the testator. There is then, commonly, a list of legacies to parish churches and religious houses'.¹⁶ The medieval will demonstrates the Christian fear of a *mors improvisa* – a sudden death – as it prevented one from achieving a state of grace through penitence.¹⁷ This fear was so common that, by the late medieval period, there was a popular belief that looking at an image of St. Christopher would protect one from sudden death for a single day, and images of the saint were often placed in prominent positions within churches.¹⁸

The ideal Christian death was a peaceful one, however a violent death could also be celebrated in the case of martyrdom; 'Martyrdom was more than an ordinary mortal death; rather, it was in itself a sign of the transcendence of death, and of it the relics of the martyrs were proof'.¹⁹ The saintly martyr was a direct link to the divine, especially Jesus, and they continued to be a living presence in a community through their physical bodies.²⁰ Binski argues that, while the early Church was preoccupied with martyrdom, a shift occurred in the cult of saints in the Middle Ages from martyrs to confessors, indicating a greater focus on a spiritual life and meritorious deeds.²¹ Christ's example combined both of these ideals, and by the means of the Cross the good death was available to all. The Crucifixion was probably the most commonly depicted scene in medieval art, and during the twelfth century these depictions became more gruesome – a trend that would continue into the late medieval period as people became increasingly concerned with the spiritual representation of the body after death.²²

¹⁶ Medieval Genealogy, *Wills*, <<https://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/guide/wil.shtml>> [accessed 18 Dec. 2024].

¹⁷ Binski, *Medieval Death*, pp. 34–36.

¹⁸ Clements, p. 38.

¹⁹ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 44.

²⁰ Mary E Leech, 'The Corpse of Public Opinion: Thomas of Norwich, Anti-Semitism, and Christian Identity', in *Dealing with the Dead*, p. 152.

²¹ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 45.

²² *Ibid.*, p.47.

An important concept is that of the Christian mass as a celebration. Describing a typical funeral in medieval England, Nicholas Orme writes:

The requiem mass had to be celebrated after the principle mass of the day if there was one, and clergy were permitted to perform a second mass for this purpose. It took place in the presence of the deceased and, in the case of important people, might include the preaching of a sermon praising their piety and urging the congregation to live devoutly and die well.²³

A mourning period of thirty days was observed, and an additional requiem mass was sometimes held for the deceased one week, one month, and even one year after the funeral depending on their resources. Wealthier people enjoyed mentions in chantry or guild masses as well as the reading of bidding prayers in church.²⁴ In fact every mass included a prayer for the dead, and All Souls' Day was a special day on which to remember them. Tombs within churches became common during the later Middle Ages, and they typically recorded only the date of death along with a plea to pray for the soul of the deceased.²⁵ The medieval churchgoer was asked to remember the dead and also the inevitability of their own death, and frequent depictions of the Last Judgement reminded them of what awaited in the afterlife.

The church and its *aitre* or churchyard was a place for the living to worship God but also a place for the dead to reside until their resurrection. 'A widespread analogy in the Middle Ages linked the welcoming of the soul into the church through baptism with the reception of the body into the graveyard upon burial'.²⁶ The notion of the cemetery as being off-limits to everyday activities had yet to fully develop, and one could find business being conducted there along with

²³ Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 341.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

²⁶ Anthony Perron, 'The Medieval Cemetery as Ecclesiastical Community: Regulation, Conflict, and Expulsion 1000-1215', in *Dealing with the Dead*, p. 253.

dancing, gambling, and sport.²⁷ Children played among the charnel houses, and refugees settled there in times of war.²⁸ Ariès comments that this attitude continues well into the seventeenth century, and that 'for more than a thousand years people had been perfectly adapted to this promiscuity between the living and the dead'.²⁹ The medieval cemetery represented a public forum, however it was still seen as a sacred space and 'a locus of numinous experience'.³⁰ Much like the juridical character of the deathbed, cemeteries also became subject to increased clerical policing during the twelfth century; the deceased could be exhumed and removed from the consecrated ground if they were deemed impious, just as the unworthy living were increasingly excluded.³¹ The unbaptized, such as stillborn babies, were usually buried on the periphery of the churchyard, while those who had committed mortal sin were buried outside, as if looking in on those who would be saved.³²

Perhaps given this 'promiscuity', it seems natural that belief in the undead became commonplace during the late Middle Ages.³³ Fears of undeath were tied to the fear of a sudden death, and as far back as the early medieval period 'there existed a base mental schema in which dying an ill-timed death, the outbreak of disease, and/or the lack of bodily decay led, in certain situations, to the belief that the dead could rise.'³⁴ The undead were dealt with by various forms of 'deviant' burial such as decapitation and staking, demonstrating how the agency of the dead could affect the living. Another manifestation of this relationship can be seen in the personification of Death that occurred through the Middle Ages. The concept of the dead

²⁷ Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, pp. 23–24.

²⁸ Perron, pp. 256–257.

²⁹ Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, p. 25.

³⁰ Perron, p. 255.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Turner, p. 394.

³³ Stephen Gordon, 'Dealing with the Undead in the Middle Ages,' in *Dealing with the Dead*, pp. 97–98.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 100. Interestingly, a lack of bodily decay after death could also be seen as a sign that the person is a saint. See: Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 15–23.

exhorting the living can be found as far back as the fifth century,³⁵ however this developed beyond a simple homily and into a direct exchange; 'By conversing with Death, man took some of the terror out of his coming and could better prepare for the finality of his end.'³⁶ The clearest example of this is the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead – a motif that takes on various guises but always consists of a dialogue between the living and dead. The dead 'speak on behalf of Death and all the dead'.³⁷ Their purpose is not just to remind us of our own death but also remind us how to live so that we can ultimately be saved.

It is worth noting that the Three Living and the Three Dead, as well as depictions of Death as the Fourth Horseman, predate the Black Death by almost a century. However, these macabre themes proliferate along with several others with the arrival of the plague.³⁸ Perhaps the most famous of these is the Dance of Death, or *Danse Macabre*, where Death is depicted dancing with different partners from all strata of society: 'the Dance of Death clearly represents an advance on the simple personification of the Grim Reaper. The dialogue with Death now is greatly extended, to 30 or more figures, and Death tailors his message to each of the living'.³⁹ Depictions of the dance are laden with social commentary; the rich and powerful invariably resist or hide from Death's approach, while the humble and impoverished willingly submit. An interesting counterpoint can be found in the transi tombs of Northern Europe, where an effigy of a rotting corpse contrasts with or even replaces an idealized living form on the tombs of high status individuals. Kathleen Cohen argues that the late medieval transi tomb represented 'a strong sense

³⁵ Hilary Fox, 'The Talking Dead: Exhortations of the Dead to the Living in Anglo-Saxon Writing,' in *Dealing with the Dead*, pp. 17–18.

³⁶ John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd Edn. (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 224.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 214–262.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

of anxiety about the fate of the soul with an intense preoccupation with death'.⁴⁰ Crises like the Black Death and the Great Famine contributed to this, however John Aberth notes that these tombs, along with other macabre art, 'provided a redemptive power that was apocalyptic in character'.⁴¹ The cadaver is a reminder of the day when that person will re-inhabit their youthful, healthy body and represents the hope of a better world to come.

It is clear that even before the turbulent events of the fourteenth century, death imagery was common in devotional and funerary art.⁴² Images of death and decay become dominant after the Black Death along with the fear of personified Death's 'capacity to surprise'.⁴³ This could represent, in the words of Huizinga, 'the excessive fear of death felt in the Middle Ages'.⁴⁴ It is difficult to deny the fixation with death present in late medieval culture. Yet we have seen how medieval cemeteries were spaces where the living communed with their dead relatives as well as each other.⁴⁵ A contrast to the fear of vengeful revenants and restless spirits is found in the images of the saints and penitent souls.⁴⁶ In one sense, death was merely 'one of the important thresholds which each generation had to cross',⁴⁷ and texts such as *Ars moriendi* and stories like the Three Living and Three Dead demonstrate how death could be a teacher. Dying was dealt with communally and publicly, and the manner of a person's death was as crucial as their life when determining their afterlife in heaven or hell.⁴⁸ This highly developed belief proved vital for

⁴⁰ Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol; the transi tomb in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), p. 48.

⁴¹ Aberth, *From the Brink*, p. 269.

⁴² Turner, p. 393.

⁴³ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Huizinga, *The Waning*, p. 134.

⁴⁵ Turner, p. 394.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 394–395.

⁴⁷ Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Turner, pp. 394–396.

people of the time to endure crises such as war, plague, and famine, and it enabled them to confront Death directly when facing their mortality.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Aberth, *From the Brink*, pp. 271–273.

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