

# Cultures of Death and Dying in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: An Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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This volume investigates certain aspects of medieval and early modern mentalities related to death in Europe, exploring some of the expressions of the European cultures of dying: customary beliefs, social practices and values related to death and dying that were shared by the people of medieval and early modern Europe. To a large extent, the Church and religion left its hallmark on this culture, defining it and giving it substance. Medieval canon law also regulated interment and who had the right to be buried in hallowed ground.<sup>2</sup>

However, we have chosen to talk about cultures in the plural to emphasize that there were parallel cultures and customs aside from the prevalent Catholic one in the Middle Ages. There was divergence and variation depending on status, social group, ethnicity, age, religion and so on, in addition to inevitable regional variations. After the Reformation, the new Evangelical churches started to form their own sets of beliefs and customs on the basis of the common Christian background while revising or abandoning some central tenets. This created more parallel cultures.

The volume deals with issues related to the Christian ideal of good death (Lat. *mors beata*).<sup>3</sup> This notion had corollaries in terms of strategies of salvation and coping with death emotionally. The Church also influenced the material preparations

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2 E.g., *Liber extra* [hereafter X] 3.28.1–14; *Liber sextus*, 3.12.1–5 both in *Corpus iuris canonici* 2, ed. Friedberg (1881).

3 About *mors beata* in, for example, the early modern Nordic context, see, e.g., Stenberg 1998.

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for death and rituals of treating the dead body. A key tenet formulated in the high Middle Ages was the notion that the individual is responsible for his or her actions in life. This religious worldview revolved around the idea of salvation based on individual merit – both sins and good deeds. Souls were destined either to heaven or hell, depending on how the individual had behaved during life. The emergence of the doctrine of purgatory (between ca. 1150–1250) as a waiting place for souls to be cleansed by divine fire for their sins between death and the Final Judgement meant that the intercessions of the saints and the living for the souls in purgatory were very welcome.<sup>4</sup>

The Reformation changed many of these teachings. However, as several of the following articles point out, the devolution was not always abrupt. Instead, old concepts and practices were negotiated and given a new context. The social functions of rituals and customs helped to preserve them regardless of religious changes. From this perspective, combining medieval and early modern, Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the same volume makes perfect sense as it will help to make insightful comparisons across time and space.

## The Universality and Unpredictability of Death and Emotional Responses to It

In medieval and early modern European society, Death, the Grim Reaper, was a recurrent and omnipresent guest. The Biblical metaphor from Jeremiah (9:22) likens the falling of human corpses to dung on the ground or hay behind the back of the reaper.<sup>5</sup> The image of mowing hay or grain was familiar to medieval and early modern people, as was the visualisation of Death as a reaper with a scythe. Epidemics, malnutrition and warfare took their toll of the human population and, in the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death spread terror that reinforced the images of death in art and folklore. Even in times of peace, death was a regular visitor in families, and especially ruthless when wrenching infants from their parents' arms.

When the Parisian lawyer Nicolas Versoris started to write a journal in 1519, his first entry was about his marriage. The next entry recorded the demise of a Parisian advocate.<sup>6</sup> In fact, during the following decade until 1530, Versoris made dozens of entries on the deaths of members of his family, lawyers, executed criminals and members of the royal house and aristocracy.<sup>7</sup> He noted the passing away of his

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4 Le Goff 1981, esp. 14–26, 178–447.

5 In the Latin Vulgate version: *“loquere haec dicit Dominus et cadet morticinum hominis quasi stercus super faciem regionis et quasi faenum post tergum metentis et non est qui colligat.”* In King James's Version of the Bible, the English rendering is: “Speak, Thus saith the LORD, Even the carcases of men shall fall as dung upon the open field, and as the handful after the harvestman, and none shall gather them.”

6 *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, ed. Joutard (1963), 27.

7 *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, ed. Joutard (1963), passim.

first wife Marie, the demise of Princess Charlotte of France (1516–1524), as well as the deaths of his own three children: first his son and a couple of years later his daughter, who both breathed their last the day they were born. Another daughter lived fifteen days.<sup>8</sup>

Although Versoris's entries tended to be laconic, barely noting their demise, this did not mean that the death of so many of his family members and in-laws left him indifferent. He occasionally wrote something on the personality or the life of the deceased, as in noting the death of his mother-in-law in 1520: "She was a good, honest and virtuous woman."<sup>9</sup> However, if Versoris made any comment on the death, it was more often a wish for the salvation of the soul of the dead. After the loss of his first wife within three days after she had fallen ill with the plague, he added on a personal note: "I pray God that he will pardon and show mercy to her poor soul."<sup>10</sup>

Emotions expressed by Versoris were echoed by many other people who have left records from the medieval and early modern period. Although people may have been more used to the omnipresence of death, they were far from being unmoved in the face of it. Both the death of individuals and mass death affected people. During one of the recurrent carnages of the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War (1407–1435), an eye-witness wrote that the streets of Paris were littered by the corpses of some hundreds of people. Indeed, "[t]hey were heaped up in piles in the mud like sides of bacon – a dreadful thing, it was."<sup>11</sup>

Then, just as now, death stirred many feelings: grief, a sense of bereavement, relief, and so on. Both men and women spontaneously expressed their inconsolable loss.<sup>12</sup> William the Conqueror, King of England (r. 1066–1087), was described in a chronicle as having been "weeping most profusely for many days" for his wife after her demise, which demonstrated "how keenly he felt [her] loss."<sup>13</sup>

Attitudes towards male demonstrations of grief may have changed in the course of the later Middle Ages. Society came to view violent passions caused by strong emotions like grief with wariness as potentially disruptive powers that had to be channeled and restrained by the more decorous rituals of mourning. When King Louis IX of France (r. 1226–1270), the future saint, heard about the death of his mother, he is reported to have fallen down with grief. However, he was reproached for demonstrating his sorrow and feelings too strongly in the presence of his subjects.<sup>14</sup> This suggested a difference between private moments of unrestrained distress and public displays of more sedate grief.

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8 *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, ed. Joutard (1963), 34, 38–39, 50–51, 72, 119.

9 *Ibid.*, 31: "*Elle estoit bonne, honneste et vertueuse femme.*"

10 *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, ed. Joutard (1963), 38–39: "*Je prie Dieu qu'il aist fait pardon et mercy à sa pauvre ame.*"

11 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 114.

12 E.g., Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 206, 210–213.

13 Daniell 1997, 54.

14 Binski 1996, 51.



Picture 1. This German fifteenth-century stained glass shows the Virgin and Saint John in tears at the crucifixion. In the course of the Middle Ages, crying was increasingly considered to be an unmanly thing to do in public.

In the course of the high Middle Ages, the uncontrollable demonstrations and outbursts of grief that had been associated with the epic masculine laments of knightly culture were increasingly perceived as unmanly expressions of feminine passion and thus unsuitable for men. Consequently, many thirteenth- and fourteenth-century communities in Italy went so far as to legislate on expressions of grief and forbid the unseemly emotional outbursts of mourners on pain of punishment. The orderly town depended on self-possessed citizens who maintained decorum in the face of calamity. Consequently, appearing bareheaded, clapping, tearing one's own hair or clothing and ripping at one's own face as a sign of grief, became punishable by a fine by law. While crying was tolerated, public wailing and loud crying was penalised even if lamentations were permitted indoors. Noisy public mourning – this seems largely to have been an elite male custom – was targeted, and some communes even enforced these criminalisations. “Stability required male emotional restraint and decorum.”<sup>15</sup>

Even in places in which expressions of grief were not restricted by law, it was more socially acceptable that women, considered more emotional and unrestrained, should display spontaneous emotion and ritual wailing both at the deathbed as well as after death. In some Italian regions, professional female mourners were hired.<sup>16</sup> However, in certain cases even widows could be perceived as too sorrowful. When Ludovic Stewart (1574–1624), Duke of Lennox and Richmond, died suddenly in 1624, Lady Frances Howard (1578–1639), his now widowed third wife, was said to have cut off her hair at her husband's death and performed “divers other

<sup>15</sup> Lansing 2008, esp. 53–98, quotation 187.

<sup>16</sup> Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 223–224; Lansing 2008, 63–64.

demonstrations of extraordinary grief.” After his funeral, the Duchess of Richmond thoroughly mourned her third husband whom she had married only two months after her second husband’s death and now lost after less than three years of marriage. But she did it:

so impatiently and with so much show of passion that many odd and idle tales are daily reported or invented of her, insomuch that many malicious people impute it as much to the loss of the court as of her Lord, and will not be persuaded that having buried two husbands already and being so far past the flower and prime of her youth she could otherwise be so passionate.<sup>17</sup>

Even if adults were supposed to master their emotions and display moderate grief, this probably did not apply children, who could feel the loss deeply when bereft of one or both of their parents. In 1673, little Gertrud Fleming, deeply upset by the death of her father, Baron Herman Fleming (1619–1673), was reported to have wept and wailed for her father for many days, until the emotional jolt gave her fever, which led to her own death.<sup>18</sup> And even if the first shock of bereavement was over, it was often followed by lifelong sorrow and feelings of loss. In the memoirs of the aristocratic Agneta Horn (1629–1672), the seventeenth-century Swedish protagonist lamented the fate of a motherless child left at the mercy of hard relatives. Agneta’s mother and little brother died of disease and lack of proper care in the chaotic conditions of the Thirty Years’ War. Agneta wistfully compared her childhood and teenage under the eye of a scolding aunt to that of her peers who had the benefit of a living and caring mother. She recorded hearing that some people would have rather seen her dead instead of her brother, and also described herself as in constant fear of losing relatives such as her maternal grandmother who loved and cherished her. Agneta Horn’s memoirs are highly partial and often vehement about many of her relatives, so one should not take all her recollections at face value; however, her text still reflects the thoughts and experiences of a person who, in spite of a high societal position, lived with the feeling of loss and fear of losing more people around her.<sup>19</sup>

The keen sense of loss is palpable in, for instance, the notebook of Duke Charles, later Charles IX of Sweden (1550–1611). Many a time did he write down the happy news of the birth of his offspring, organised their christening festivities and wrote down his hopes for the future of the child, or praised the Lord for his grace, having come home and found his spouse and children wealthy and safe.<sup>20</sup> Very often, however, he had the sad task of writing down the date of death of his beloved children, making references to his “sorrow and grief,” although consoling

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17 Gittings 1984, 192–193.

18 *Personalia Öfwer Högwälborne Herr Herman Flemming friherre til Libelitz, herre til Wilnäs. samt dess K: dotter Jungfru Gertrud Flemming.*

19 Horn 1961 (1656), 15, 30–31, 39–40, 53.

20 *Calendaria Caroli IX*, ed. Lewenhaupt (1903), 24–25, 41, 43, 73, 75, 76, 79.

himself with their resurrection.<sup>21</sup> In 1589, he lost one of his daughters and his wife and described mournfully how his dear spouse was laid in the grave with many beloved departed children. Being left alone with only one surviving daughter, he wrote down his wish that he could soon join his wife. Then, however, he turned to God for consolation:

God Almighty be thanked and praised for his grace in good times and bad times alike. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord, may he give me patience in all my sorrow.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, research has indicated that bereavement and the death of one's children, spouses and close relatives led to melancholy and depression for medieval and early modern people just as now. However, the hope of a reunion in Paradise and the religious doctrines provided consolation. Resignation in the face of death was a strategy of coping with inevitability.<sup>23</sup>

Loss felt by parents is also discussed by Viktor Aldrin in his analysis of parental grief in light of Swedish miracle stories. In "Parental Grief and Prayer in the Middle Ages: Religious Coping in Swedish Miracle Stories," Aldrin discusses stories that record accidents that happened to children, the parents' immediate reactions and attempts to cope with the situation in which their beloved child was supposedly dead. Aldrin considers the phases of parental grief from the first shock and disbelief to starting to let go of the deceased child, organising the funeral.

Aldrin observes that there was less gendered difference in the expressions of grief in the parents of the dead children in Sweden than on the Continent and Britain, as both Swedish fathers and mothers cried. The study by Carol Lansing suggests that earlier Italian miracle stories depicted even men wailing and crying loudly at the loss of close relatives before the expressions of grief permitted for Italian men were transformed in the later Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> Thus, emotions were universal, but their manifestations were culturally determined and changed over time.

In the midst of their deep sorrow, the Swedish parents were partly directing their thoughts to funeral preparations, but partly still resisting what had happened, praying to the saints for a miracle. Demonstrating the intensity of love and grief, the narratives analysed by Aldrin describe fervent prayers for a miracle, divine intervention that would restore the loved one to life. These stories reveal the sorrow and reactions of grieving parents in general, although they have an unusually happy ending through the miraculous deliverance of the children from death.

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21 "[M]edh sårgh och bedröffuelse", *Calendaria Caroli IX*, ed. Lewenhaupt (1903), 18, 20, 39–41, 43, 52, 63, 71.

22 "Ten alzmechtige gudh ware tack och låff för sine nåder både för mott och medh, herren gaff och herren togh, welsignett ware herrens namn och förläne migh tålemodh i all min bedröffuelse," *Calendaria Caroli IX*, ed. Lewenhaupt (1903), 65–66.

23 E.g., Laurence 1989, 62–76.

24 Lansing 2008, 88–93.

Such extraordinary resurrections from death to life could also occasionally be witnessed in other instances as well. For example, in 1528, a score of Parisians testified as eye-witnesses when a criminal was resuscitated after having been hanged for half an hour when his body was cut down and put on a wagon. His amazing return to life was considered by the onlookers as a miracle by the will of God and the Virgin Mary. It was attributed to the fact that the condemned, swearing to his innocence of the homicide he was accused of, had wished to deliver a speech to honour the Virgin Mary. This oration had been interrupted by the hangman. While this was hailed as a miracle by the people and the young man was pardoned by the king because of the intervention of the Virgin, at least some thought that the executioner had simply done a botched job.<sup>25</sup> Such miracles could also result in canonisation processes as Robert Bartlett has mentioned: the hanging and resurrection of the Welsh criminal William Cragh in 1290 became evidence in the canonisation investigations of Thomas de Cantilupe (ca. 1218–1282) in 1307.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving emotional aspects aside, the imminence of death required people to prepare for the possibility of dying. A person could be here one moment, gone the next, suddenly as by a thunderbolt just as happened to a man quite literally during a thunderstorm in Paris in 1409. The other afflicted man had only been “knocked senseless,” surviving the unexpected stroke of lightning.<sup>27</sup> The unpredictability of fate and the fickleness of Fortune was also a well-known late medieval *topos* in art and literature. Life was aleatory and its duration could neither be known nor influenced. The famous poem *Fortuna Imperatrix mundi* (Fortune, Empress of the World) in the *Carmina Burana* collection (number 17), describes how fate plays with the lives of people. Fortune was as changeable as the moon. Fate could suddenly melt away both poverty and power like ice as the cruel and inane destiny turned the wheel of fortune.<sup>28</sup> The anonymous chronicler of Paris described how Thomas Montacute, Earl of Salisbury (1388–1428), died as a consequence of a cannon shot at the age of forty in 1428: “Fortune, to none a faithful friend, showed him how she can behave without warning to those who trust her [...]”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when the chronicler accounted the accidental drowning of Thomas, Baron de Ros (1406–1430), together with some other nobleman and soldiers in 1430, he wrote that “Fortune was unkind to him.”<sup>30</sup>

The transience of life had also an effect on art. The wheel of fortune (*rota fortunae*) was a popular topic in late-medieval art. It usually depicts a king in the

25 *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, ed. Joutard (1963), 122–123, 178–180.

26 Bartlett 2004.

27 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 50–51.

28 “O Fortuna,/ velut luna/ statu variabilis [...] egestatem/ potestatem/ dissolvit ut glaciem/ [...] Sors immanis/ et inanis/ rota tu volubilis [...]”, quoted from Lehtonen 1995, 110.

29 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 226.

30 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 251. For a contrary example, see *ibid.*, 350.

four stages of the wheel of fortune. First he is on his way up, to govern in the future. Then, after reigning and having reigned, the king loses his reign and becomes earth. The wheel of fortune showed in a very illustrative way how even the potentates of the world were merely hapless pawns in the game of fortune in life and death.<sup>31</sup>



Picture 2. The wheel of fortune, a popular topos in the later Middle Ages, demonstrated the fickleness of fate. The ruler is shown at different stages with the accompanying texts: *Regnabo* (I will rule), *Regno* (I am ruling), *Regnavi* (I ruled) and, for the corpse under the wheel, *Sum sine regno* (I am without a reign).

The *ubi sunt* (“where are”) genre in literature called to mind the whereabouts of those who were already dead. The great men and women of the past or the former comrades of one’s youth had already been eaten by worms and had become dust.

<sup>31</sup> Lehtonen 1995, 73–122.

For example, the epic poem *Beowulf*, written in Old English and preserved to our days in a single manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A XV) from ca. 1000, contains a lament about the loss of a warrior's entourage and men through death.<sup>32</sup> Late medieval mentalities were attuned to the cultures of death by the vicissitudes of the time: the Black Death, recurrent epidemics and warfare. In the Middle Ages, a whole form of literature, the *ars moriendi*, instructing people about the way of dying properly, developed for the use of the clergy and laity alike. Some *ars moriendi* versions recalled of the mortality of all, high and low alike, who all were "under the hand and will of Almighty God." "We all, regardless of our position, popes, emperors, archbishops, kings, high or low, rich and poor, have to die. We have all come to here to this world like pilgrims so that we are to leave it."<sup>33</sup>

The *memento mori*, remembering one's mortality, became a popular motif in art. The *dance macabre*, with Death leading all sorts of people, rich and poor, young and old, men and women, to the dance, gained in popularity after the Black Death. The *dance macabre* reflected the powerlessness of people in the face of death, the great equaliser. Temporal wealth, power, beauty and youth were fleeting and useless in the face of death. Worldly pursuits were futile and empty in one's last hour as everyone was destined to be a rotting corpse, food for maggots, in the end.<sup>34</sup> As the character of Death stated in the morality play *Everyman*:

Lord, I will in the world go run overall,  
And cruelly outsearch both great and small.<sup>35</sup>

The suddenness of death was further highlighted by its most common symbols, arrows, darts or javelins that came suddenly from nowhere and hit the unsuspecting victim.<sup>36</sup> While the Dance of Death was a general motif, such images of the universal mortal lot of mankind could also be customised. The tragic and premature death of Duchess Mary of Burgundy (1457–1482) as a consequence of a hunting accident may have led to the commissioning of miniatures of the Duchess

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32 "Hold, ground, the gold of the earls! Men could not. Cowards they were not/ but took it from thee once, but war-death took them,/ that stops life, struck them, spared not one/ man of my people, passed on now./ They have had their hall-joys, I have not with me/ a man able to unsheathe this. [...] / Who shall polish this plated vessel/ this treasured cup? The company is elsewhere./ This hardened helmet healed with gold/ shall lose its shell. They sleep now/ whose work was to burnish the battle-masks; so that the cuirass that in the crash took/ bite of iron among breaking shields:/ it moulders with the man. This mail-shirt travelled far/ hung from a shoulder that shouldered warriors: it shall not jingle again./ There's no joy from harp-play,/ glee-wood's gladness, no good hawk/ swings through the hall now, no swift horse/ tramps at the threshold. Terrible slaughter/ has carried into darkness many kindreds of mankind," *Beowulf*, trans. Alexander (1987), 122.

33 *Gersons lärdom huru man skall dö*, fol. Aiii<sup>v</sup>: "[A]th wil ære alle saman liggiande wnder allmectogx gwdz handh ok wnder hans helgha wilia. Ok wi alle saman æ aff hwadh stath wi ære Pawe kesare ærkebiscopar konungar høgha eller lagha fathigha ok rike wi ære alle pliktoge dø. Vi ære kompne hyth y thenne wedhene sa som pelegrimmer ath wi skwle wetha fara hædhan."

34 Kurtz 1934; Oosterwijk 2011, 20–41.

35 *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. Cawley (1959), 209.

36 Kurtz 1934, 40–41, 52, 63, 77, 86, 91, 134, 143; Oosterwijk 2011, 26–28.

on horseback, being chased by a mounted corpse, symbolizing Death, armed with a spear. The *topos* of three living young men meeting three dead men on a hunting trip was adapted to include the Duchess and her spouse Maximilian of Austria (1459–1519), the future Emperor Maximilian I. Alternatively, the Duchess had had it commissioned in her lifetime, depicting herself, little knowing that she would be dead in the flower of her life, crushed by her horse after a fall when hawking with her husband.<sup>37</sup>



Picture 3. The “three living and the three dead” was a well-known topic in later medieval literature and art. The three young men or kings were hunting when they came across the three corpses. These reminded them of the transience of life and of the necessity to prepare for death while living.

Georges Duby has argued that the late medieval culture of the macabre is to be interpreted rather as a sign of an “excessive love of life” than the “real misfortunes of the times” (*traduit moins le malheur réel des temps qu’un excès d’attachement à la vie*). The bigger the passion to live, he argues, the more painful was the bitterness

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37 Kralik 2011, 146–154.

of being torn from it.<sup>38</sup> Yet, it is hard to imagine that the cruel ravages of war and plagues of various kinds would not have its effects on the collective mindset of people. Chiffolleau talks about a Great Melancholy (*La Grande Mélancholie*) and a deep traumatisation.<sup>39</sup>

It is hardly a coincidence that the first known *danse macabre* mural was painted in 1424–1425 at the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, a city tortured by famines, pestilence and war for a long time.<sup>40</sup> The Parisians took their afflictions to be a sign of divine wrath and punishment. Similarly, it can be asked whether the frequency of the representations of the Day of Judgement, the purgatory and the pains of hell in wall paintings in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century churches is coincidental or related to changes in mentality.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, because of the uncertainties of life and the capriciousness of fortune, people had to devise strategies to cope with death. One of these, described by Georges Duby, was to “domesticate” or “tame” death so that it was very rarely perceived as coming as a surprise. According to Duby, one of “its essential characteristics was to give advance warning of its arrival.” Something anticipated became easier to handle and accept.<sup>42</sup>

Some people, like the inhabitants of Siena, attempted to domesticate death by a sense of manipulating the future through their intricate post-plague testamentary practices. Sienese testators sought increasingly to control the existence of the living after their own death by minutely detailed clauses in their wills. “With complex contingency plans, they sought to dictate events in that previously uncharted geography of time between the day of death and earthly perpetuity.”<sup>43</sup> Jacques Chiffolleau has observed that late medieval testators from Southern France tended to see death as a “slow and precise ritual scenario” concentrated especially between the death agony and the return from the cemetery. The stage-like process of dying took as much as a year to complete. In addition, the testators started to dramatise their death by making it – and their funerals – into a spectacle for the rest of society.<sup>44</sup>

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38 Duby 1983, 164.

39 Chiffolleau 1980, 205–207, 430–432.

40 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 204.

41 Vovelle & Vovelle 1970, 14–16.

42 Duby 1981, 6, 10.

43 Cohn 1988, 67. See also *ibid.*, 140–145.

44 Chiffolleau 1980, 149: “*Pour la majorité des testateurs la mort n’est pas un acte instantané; elle se ‘fait’ lentement, dans un scénario rituel précis, qui se concentre entre l’agonie et le retour du cimetière, mais qui dure en fait le plus souvent douze mois, jusqu’au bout-de-l’an. L’idée que le passage dans l’au delà, ou que l’au-delà lui-même, comporte plusieurs étapes, est installée solidement dans les consciences. [...] L’image d’une mort théâtralisée par le testateur lui-même remplace peu à peu celle d’une mort entièrement prise de charge par les parents et les voisins. Au lieu d’être socialisée dans un rite professionnel où la participation de tous est requise, le décès est seulement, et magnifiquement, offert en spectacle au reste de la société.*”

However, although people were generally aware of the fickleness of Fortune and attempted to domesticate death, some groups of people were involved in more dangerous activities than others. They needed to form special strategies to control the uncertainty present in their everyday life. As Iris Ridder argues in her article “Dicing towards Death: An Oracle Game for Miners at Falun Copper Mine from the Early Seventeenth Century,” the miners had their own strategies in trying to cope with the unexpected death, *mors improvisa*. Using a little book written for his amusement, a miner would first wish for something, throw three dice, see the score and then find a poem linked to the score. Every poem gave the miner different advice for his life and in regard to his wishes. Ridder gives an example of the ways people in a very hazardous position could try to maintain some feeling of control over their lives – or (rather probable) deaths.

### Parallel Cultures of Dying: Christian, Heretical, Pagan and Reformation Challenges

When a person realised that death was close, he or she turned his thoughts to arranging his soul for the afterlife. The omnipresence of imminent death made people invest in their salvation by what the French historian Jacques Chiffolleau has called the “accounting of the afterlife” (*la comptabilité de l’au-delà*). Through the process of the “mathematics of salvation” (*mathématique du salut*), people assessed the necessary sums to be spent on pious causes (*ad pios usus*), including masses, anniversary masses, alms, legacies, wills and donations, to guarantee some relief from the pains of purgatory pending the Last Judgement. They organised their budget for the afterlife.<sup>45</sup> Preparing for death could also mean worrying about the memory and post-mortem reputation of the dying. This could be done by, for example, preparing or commissioning works of art, effigies, memorials or literary works.

Confession of one’s sins, contrition and making amends were part of the penitential process that was to be concluded before death. Because of this, it was generally presupposed – in law as well – that a man facing death would speak the absolute truth as otherwise his soul risked eternal damnation. In addition to the confession of sins, praying for the dying and extreme unction formed part of the religious deathbed rituals in medieval and early modern Europe. Priests had their own handbooks advising them on how to approach a person on his sickbed and how to console him. The administering of the *viaticum*, the eucharist or communion for the dying, was also central.<sup>46</sup> Naturally, regional variations also existed. In medieval upper Ariège and many other parts of Western France, Le Roy Ladurie

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45 Chiffolleau 1980, 212–229, 389–425, 434–435. For such customs, see also, e.g., Daniell 1997, 11–24.

46 See, e.g., Fallberg Sundmark 2008.

tells us, extreme unction was not part of the normal preparation for death. Instead, confession and communion was what the dying wished for.<sup>47</sup>

Sudden death was perceived as shameful and a threat because the soul could not be prepared for the afterlife in accordance with the cultural understanding of a good death. Moreover, as the ideal death took place at home surrounded by one's family and friends, this was not necessarily the case with sudden death.<sup>48</sup> However, even a condemned criminal could stage a good death by steadfast devotion, confession, repentance, atonement, mortification of the flesh and meeting the executioner with fortitude.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, both at the deathbed and after death, the rites of passage consoled the living if properly performed. As death was omnipresent and attendance at deathbeds was a feature of every-day life, people internalised the elements of a good death and learned how to stage and prepare for one. However, the *ars moriendi* handbooks also lamented that, through diabolical instigation, people were too confident about still living for a long time, and thus neglected to prepare themselves for death.<sup>50</sup>

The common perceptions involving the mortality of the body and the immortality of the soul define the medieval ecclesiastical culture of death and dying. In Christian belief, the soul of the person left the physical body, which started to decompose at the moment of death. The Catholic theologians rejected the Aristotelian notion that “[o]f all terrible things, the death of the body is the most terrible” as the soul and its salvation were considered much more important. The death of the soul was, indeed, detestable.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the Catholic perceptions of dying, other beliefs and rituals existed in the Middle Ages. Pagan elements existed alongside the Christian – and heretical – cultures of death. Some of these were related to beliefs about spirits and dead bodies. In medieval Montaillou, for example, some believed that through clippings of hair and nails that contained the particularly potent energy of a dead head of the family, this energy could be transmitted into his relatives. Thus, his house would remain fortunate. Neither were dead bodies bathed, their faces only being sprinkled with water, so that nothing essential would be washed away from the skin.<sup>52</sup> Some also believed that owls flying in the night could in fact be demons on a mission to carry away the souls of the recently dead.<sup>53</sup>

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47 Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 313.

48 E.g., Beier 1989, 56–60; Duby 1981, 10–11, 108.

49 Boyden 1999, 256–261, 265; Beier 1989, 60.

50 Campbell 1995, 18, 21.

51 Campbell 1995, 20–21: “*Omnium terribilium mors corporis sit terribilissima.*”

52 Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 31–33, 42, 61.

53 Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 42.

In her article, “The Remembrance of the Deceased in the Traditional Polish Culture of the Middle Ages,” Beata Wojciechowska investigates the interaction between pagan and Christian cultures of death and dying. She discusses beliefs and ideas about the other world and ancient Slavic conceptions that were present in local belief systems even centuries after initial Christianisation. She analyses the remaining fragments of the pre-Christian concepts of the afterlife, emphasising the efforts of the living to secure the well-being of their deceased ancestors. The souls of the dead were taken care of according to old traditions, and were commemorated and even called on during many Christian festivities, such as All Soul’s and Pentecost. Traditional celebrations reflected the belief that the souls of the dead were present among the living. Although the Church opposed these practices, many continued for centuries, removed from the once coherent systems and partly assimilated to Christian teachings.

Some Christian burial customs, discussed below in more detail, also had superstitious and popular significance. For example, the vigil over the dead from the moment of death to burial and the accompanying prayers and sprinkling of holy water not only eased the soul’s stay in purgatory, but also protected the living as long as the corpse was among them.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the ringing of bells was considered to have a protective function by warding off demons. This was why some Puritans dismissed bell-ringing at funerals as superstitious.<sup>55</sup>

Some sects, such as the Cathars, labelled heretics and persecuted by the Church, presented alternative deathbed ideologies and rituals. The Cathars considered the *consolamentum* their only sacrament. The “consoling” purified the believer of the pleasures and sin of the world in order to get closer to God and heaven. The ritual involved the reading of Biblical texts and the “perfect,” the spiritual leader, who had received the *consolamentum* and who observed the regulations of purity, laying his or her hands on the consoled. One of the main duties of the perfect was to console the dying, but the dying had to be conscious of being able to answer the questions posed in the ceremony.<sup>56</sup> After receiving the *consolamentum* on their death-beds, some Cathars refused food altogether, wishing to accelerate dying in the pure state and to minimise the risk of breaching the duties of the perfect even if fresh water could be drunk after the ritual. This fasting leading to death was called the *endura*, and sometimes even family members watched over the dying lest the fasting be breached and so that death would come in this pure state.<sup>57</sup>

Because of the persecutions, the consolation of the dying had become secret, with few other Cathars present. Sometimes the ceremony had to be hidden from close family members who opposed Cathar beliefs. Some individuals even

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54 Harding 1999, 179.

55 Daniell 1997, 53; Gittings 1984, 48–53.

56 Lambert 1998, 239–240.

57 Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 211–212, 218–220, 223–230; Lambert 1998, 240–244.

received both the extreme unction and the *consolamentum*, while others protested against the visit of the local clergyman wishing to administer the last rites.<sup>58</sup> Thus a covert subculture with secret rites could take place beyond the orthodox Catholic deathbed rituals and the communal vigil at the bedside. On the other hand, some French Huguenots, as the French Protestants were called, did their best to avoid having the Catholic parish priest administer the last rites to them and received the Huguenot ministers in secret. Others alleged that the death had been so sudden that there had not been enough time to send for the Catholic priest, while Huguenot nobles especially wished to preserve their patrimony from confiscation and preserved an outward conformity by accepting the Catholic deathbed rites.<sup>59</sup>

It is also important to be sensitive to the changes in the cultures of death resulting from transitions from the Catholic Middle Ages to Reformation Protestantism. Many of them were quite sudden and very concrete. For example, the Parliament in England forbade purchasing masses for the deceased by law in 1529.<sup>60</sup> The Protestants also changed “the geography of afterlife”<sup>61</sup> as reformers dismissed as unbiblical both the doctrine of purgatory and the limbo where the souls of unbaptised infants awaited.<sup>62</sup>

More subtle changes took place in religious literary genres. The *ars moriendi* literature was transformed from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century to reflect various trends: humanism (e.g., by adding classical exempla) and Reformation beliefs (e.g., by attacking certain Catholic customs and doctrines).<sup>63</sup> For example, the late medieval *ars moriendi* literature had played upon the uncertainty of salvation and offered consolation accordingly. Vacillating between hope and despair, the lonely dying person, the *moriens*, was to choose the right path to death and to resist temptation in order to maximise the chances of salvation by, for example, good works. However, Reformation theologians rejected the notion of earning one’s salvation, emphasising that Christ had defeated the powers of death, sin and hell for mankind. Faith was foregrounded, as well as joy over the certainty of salvation.<sup>64</sup>

This theme is also further examined in Eivor Andersen Oftestad’s article “Investing in the Afterlife in Medieval and Early Modern Denmark: Two Readings of the Poem *De aetatis hominis*.” The article investigates how the message of the poem (first published in 1514) was later transformed according to the theological rearrangement that followed the new certainty of salvation. Oftestad shows how

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58 Lambert 1998, 239–240; Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 223.

59 Roberts 1999, esp. 134–137.

60 Binski 1996, 122.

61 Expression (*géographie de l’au-delà*) of Jacques Le Goff (1981, 10).

62 E.g., Marshall 1999, 112–116.

63 Beaty 1970.

64 Reinis 2007, 243–258.

the poem was not abandoned but re-elaborated by the Danish humanist Anders Sørensen Vedel (1542–1616) in 1571. Originally, the main character had died a lonely death as a consequence of his evil life. As the Reformation emphasised faith, not deeds, even the moral of the poem was changed. While the medieval version underlined the insecurity of salvation, Vedel's version distinguished between evil and pious human beings. Evil consequences faced those who had rejected the Word of God, while the obedient and penitent could be confident of their salvation. Oftestad's analysis provides an intriguing example of how medieval motives were partly maintained, partly re-negotiated in the Reformation period.

### **Bodies and Burials of the Dead: The Dominant Ecclesiastical Culture of Interment and Examples of Parallel Cultures**

This frightening passage from the land of the living to the realm of the dead was perilous for both those who had died and those remaining. Therefore, there had to be a variety of rites of separation, transition and incorporation – as Arnold van Gennep has so perceptively pointed out in his *Les rites de passage* (1909) – ensuring a smooth and successful passing. The souls of the dead had to be made comfortable in the next world so as to prevent them from returning. The risks related to the perilous dead had to be harnessed by first achieving the culturally defined good death and posthumously by performing all the necessary communal rites pertaining to a dignified burial.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, funeral rituals had a number of functions to fulfil in society. One of the most fundamental of these was to guarantee that the dead are comfortable enough in their dwelling place to leave the living alone and not hinder them in any way. The rites also helped to fill voids left by the death in the family and larger community, a function even more pronounced in the case of dignitaries, and to manifest grief and loss. The transfer of property and status from the deceased to the living was also marked by such rituals. In addition, funerary rituals highlighted “shared kinship and corporate solidarity,” exhibited status and largesse and thus demonstrated or attempted to renegotiate existing social hierarchies.<sup>66</sup>

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65 Van Gennep 1960 (1909), 146–165.

66 Houlbrooke 1989a, 1.



Picture 4. Funerals were important status symbols in medieval and early modern Europe. However, some preferred a simple interment due to personal preferences or religious notions. The burial scene is from a French Book of Hour from about 1478.

Funerals were important status indicators. The lavishness of the ceremonies often became an important aim as obsequies were shows of wealth, connection and power. Funeral expenses consequently became the target of sumptuary laws regulating the expenditure and limiting such things as the number of attendants. Such laws already existed in ancient Greece and Rome. As a sign of largesse, funerals could involve the distribution of items of clothing, footwear, and food to

attendants and poor people. A mixture of secular and religious motives was behind such munificence. On the one hand, it was again a display of individual and family wealth. On the other, almsgiving was a pious act, and the recipients were expected to pray for the soul of their deceased benefactor.<sup>67</sup>

The funeral procession, an important rite of passage in itself, was one of the most visual parts of the ceremonies. It was public and meant to be beheld. The more people attending the cortege, the better. The more times the church bells rang for the deceased, the higher his or her status. The place of final repose was also an important status symbol, as burial in church, especially close to the altar, could be reserved for clerics and members of the elite. Candles or torches carried by the participants were an integral part of the funeral procession.<sup>68</sup> The more torches and the bigger they were, the higher was the status of the deceased, as Håkon Haugland has pointed out in his article “‘To Help the Deceased Guild Brother to His Grave:’ Guilds, Death and Funeral Arrangements in Late-Medieval and Early Modern Norway (c. 1300–1900).”

The procession of a member of a corporation became a show of mutual solidarity and the power of the collective. As Haugland discusses in his article in this volume, mutual aid and the participation of guild members was essential in organizing the funeral for a deceased member of a craft guild. Haugland analyses the mutual help the guilds of late medieval and early modern Norway could provide when one of their members died, and how the Reformation in 1536 changed the role of guilds. One of the consequences of the Reformation was that guilds in the countryside withered away. The continuity, on the other hand, is represented in the role of both medieval and early modern guilds in supporting the burials of the deceased members. Haugland points out that the craft guilds had religious functions both in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period; thus he emphasises the continuity over the Reformation period, challenging the previous outcomes of Norwegian research.

Nevertheless, at the time of war, pestilence or famine, the mortality rates were so high and, in case of disease, the fear of contagion so acute, that the ordinary solemnities had to be forgone and the piles of corpses disposed of with curtailed ceremonies or even without ceremony altogether. During the Black Death, burials had indeed to be curtailed and new plague cemeteries consecrated.<sup>69</sup> According to Giovanni Boccaccio, writing about Florence during the Black Death: “Nor therefore were the dead honoured with aught of tears or candles or funeral train; nay, the thing was come to such a pass that folk recked no more of men that died than nowadays they would of goats.”<sup>70</sup>

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67 E.g., Daniell 1997, 55–57.

68 In general, see Daniell 1997, 44–58; Epstein 1984, 157–158; Gittings 1984, 28–29.

69 Wray 2009, 225–226, 232.

70 Boccaccio 1925 (1348–1353), trans. Payne, 15.

Serious epidemics caused havoc, especially in towns, pre-empting carefully made plans concerning burials and graves. As the anonymous Parisian chronicler reported in the autumn of 1418, towns-dwellers were dying like flies. “[P]eople died as fast as ever. When it got so bad that no one could think where to bury them, huge pits were dug, five at Holy Innocents, four at the Trinity, at the others according to their capacity, and each pit held about six hundred people.”<sup>71</sup> Amidst another bout of the plague in Paris in 1522, Nicholas Versoris recounted how more than forty victims of the pestilence were buried at the cemetery of the Innocents alone on a single day.<sup>72</sup> As Boccaccio reported in his *Decamerone* of Florence during the Black Death:

Many breathed their last in the open street, whilst other many, for all they died in their houses, made it known to the neighbours that they were dead rather by the stench of their rotting bodies than otherwise; and of these and others who died all about the whole city was full. [...] The consecrated ground sufficing not to the burial of the vast multitude of corpses aforesaid, which daily and well nigh hourly came carried in crowds to every church,—especially if it were sought to give each his own place, according to ancient usance,—there were made throughout the churchyards, after every other part was full, vast trenches, wherein those who came after were laid by the hundred and being heaped up therein by layers, as goods are stowed aboard ship, were covered with a little earth, till such time as they reached the top of the trench.<sup>73</sup>

In Christian belief, when the dead were resurrected at the Last Judgement, the physical body and the soul were reunited. Because of the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection and rejoining body and soul, the Church favoured burials of the intact body instead of cremation, and the total destruction of the body was a drastic action. The burning of the body of heretics, sodomites and witches was a powerful way of preventing them from resurrecting – the worldly parallel was the burning or razing of a heretic’s house to the ground.<sup>74</sup> In times of crisis, even the corpses were not safe. Reports of hungry wolves digging up recently buried cadavers in graveyards and devouring them circulated in the Middle Ages.<sup>75</sup> Theologians considered the question of whether beasts that had devoured people would also be resurrected at the Last Judgement in order to vomit their prey so that these could be resurrected.<sup>76</sup>

Certain other religions, like Tibetan Buddhism, practice sky burials or vulture-disposal, a means of recycling corpses in which the dead bodies are dissected, defleshed and crushed before leaving these human remains to be devoured by

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71 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 132.

72 *Journal d’un bourgeois de Paris*, ed. Joutard (1963), 39.

73 Boccaccio 1925 (1348–1353), trans. Payne, 15.

74 Le Roy Ladurie 1987, 37.

75 E.g., *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 162.

76 Binski 1996, 202–203.

vultures.<sup>77</sup> Such practices would have been considered dishonouring the dead in the Western tradition. It is known that the Catholic Church was against cremation, largely successfully as archaeological evidence indicates. At least it is customary to assume that abandoning cremation in Nordic burial places as well as the introduction of items with Christian symbols in the graves, is a sign of Christianisation.<sup>78</sup>

However, there were other funerary customs viewed by the Church as irreverent and cruel abuses that it attempted to ban in the Later Middle Ages. Especially among dignitaries dying far from home, it was customary to disembowel the cadaver, dismember and cook it so that the bones were dis severed from the flesh. The bones could then be easily transported and interred. This practice was known as “embalming *more teutonico*,” an originally German custom that became widespread by the thirteenth century. Indeed, the bodies of certain saints such as Saint Louis XI of France (1214–1270) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) were treated this way.<sup>79</sup> It came, however, to be vehemently opposed by the papacy. In his bull *Detestandae feritatis*, Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303) forbade this practice regardless of the status or condition of the deceased on pain of excommunication *ipso facto* in 1299. The strongest possible expressions were used to condemn the custom of chopping up and boiling the body in water: it was called a “savage abuse” (*feritatis abusum*), and the custom is called “cruel” and “horrendous for the faithful” (*saevitia [...] mentesque fidelium horror conmoveat*). This abomination was considered impious both in the eyes of the Divine Majesty as in those of humans, and the body thus treated would be denied Christian burial.<sup>80</sup>

Even though the rubric only applied to the cutting up and boiling of bodies, it also encompassed the “dispersed burials,” cutting up, eviscerating and division of corpses and the burial of various body parts (such as the heart, entrails and body) at different locations. Thus, dispersed burials were also banned by the papacy. However, papal dispensations are known to have been granted to persons of influence so that instead of abolishing the custom, it became an even more desirable status indicator of the highest echelons of medieval society.<sup>81</sup> Thus, from the early fifteenth century, it is reported that after an English nobleman, Sir Robert Harling, had died while fighting in France, his cadaver was dissected and

boiled in a cauldron at the St. Nicholas cemetery until the flesh came off the bones. These were then carefully cleaned and packed in a chest to be taken to England. The flesh, the entrails and water were buried in a big grave at the St. Nicholas cemetery.<sup>82</sup>

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77 Wylie 1964–1965, 232–235.

78 See, for example, Taavitsainen 1989, 13–28; Mägi 2002, 153–154.

79 Brown 1981, 226–246; Binski 1996, 63–64; Bynum 1995, 203–208.

80 Extravagantes communes, 3.6.1. in *Corpus Iuris Canonici* 2, ed. Friedberg (1881); Brown 1981, 221–223; Binski 1996, 63–64.

81 Brown 1981, 228–246, 250–265.

82 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 297.

The defleshed skeleton of the knight was then easily transported to his domicile in East Harling in Norfolk where it was entombed in the local Church.<sup>83</sup>

It has been argued that the dispersed burials were a “final exertion of the royal [or noble] virtue of largesse” as the cut-out bodily parts were donations and indications of patronage.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the same Parisian chronicler described another dispersed burial, that of Margaret of Burgundy, Duchess of Guyenne (1393–1442), with less gruesome details. While the Duchess’s body was interred in a Parisian church dedicated to Our Lady, her heart was to be taken to Notre-Dame of Liesse.<sup>85</sup>

Both “embalming *more teutonico*” and dispersed burials represent other, parallel cultural expressions linked to death. Considering that important royal dynasties persisted in disembowelling their dead members, this ban seems to have largely disregarded among the elite, even without special authorisation or fear of excommunication. Moreover, another important motive for chopping up bodies was naturally related to a central tenet of Christian doctrine, namely, the cult of saints. The trade in relics, severed body parts of saints, had been initiated in late Antiquity and continued throughout the Middle Ages and caused the Church fathers to debate the possibility of resurrection in these cases. For example, Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430) considered resurrections as “the reassemblage” of all the bits and pieces of the body. Yet, judging by Roman legislation and Christian sermons banning the chopping up of and commerce in body parts, the trade in relics started to grow in the latter half of the fourth century.<sup>86</sup> It continued to flourish in the Middle Ages, and the boiling of dead potential saints was necessary to have “the bones [...] more quickly available for distribution.”<sup>87</sup>

It is also important to keep in mind that “Christian” burial practices were not necessarily static in the course of the period in question nor were followed across the whole Church. For example, evidence from burial sites in Anglo-Saxon England suggests that pregnant women who died before or during childbirth were buried with the foetus still in the womb. These “*in utero* double burials” suggest that the practice differs from the norms found in thirteenth and early fourteenth-century conciliar statutes according to which unborn and thus unbaptised foetuses were to be cut out from their mother’s uterus before burial.<sup>88</sup> Twelfth-century Norwegian ecclesiastical norms however forbade this practice even though the foetus was unbaptised and heathen.<sup>89</sup> Related to this was the question of whether a pregnant woman could be buried in consecrated ground or not in her unclean state. The

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83 Ibid., 297 fn. 1.

84 Binski 1996, 64.

85 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 347.

86 Bynum 1995, 104–106.

87 Bynum 1995, 201–203.

88 Sayer & Dickinson 2013, 289–290.

89 Sellevold 2008, 63–64; Carlsson 1972, 136.

matter had been debated in the earlier Middle Ages, but had been resolved in the high Middle Ages by authorising that pregnant women should be buried in the churchyard like any other Christian. Nevertheless, contrary opinions were expressed even later in the Middle Ages.<sup>90</sup>

There were also other parallel cultures and popular beliefs regarding the bodies of executed criminals. In seventeenth-century Sweden, people believed that the flying smoke from the pyre of criminals burnt for committing the heinous crime of bestiality caused crop failure, which explains why the people of the locality preferred to have the penalty of burning commuted to a heavy, collectively raised fine. However, this was dismissed as popular Catholic superstition by the King, who wished to enforce the law according to its letter and the word of God as an example for all.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, one can observe that side by side with the standard religious practices, other cultures existed partly because of regional customs. For example, in his analysis of Sienese wills, Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. has observed that testators included more instructions on how their bodies were to be dressed in the post-plague era after 1363.<sup>92</sup> Here, obviously, a comparative study would be interesting as such clauses on how to dress the body seem not to have been customary, e.g., in medieval Scandinavian wills.

Parallel cultures also existed for status-related reasons, although some may have been condemned by the official Church. The Church usually advocated a speedy burial. For example, medieval Norwegian legislation insisted on timely burial within five days unless extraordinary circumstances prevented this, in which case the corpse was to be moved into an outbuilding and hoisted up for safety until interment could take place.<sup>93</sup> However, as aristocratic and royal burials in particular took long to prepare for in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, embalming was often a necessity to prevent putrefaction before burial. As embalming required skill and expensive materials, it also became an elite status symbol, just like the dispersed burials discussed above.<sup>94</sup>

While funeral customs usually marked splendour and wealth, other status-related funeral customs underlined humility. Some monastic rules prescribed penitential elements for the post-mortem preparation of the corpses of monks, to be laid on sackcloth with ashes shaped like a cross. After washing, the corpse was dressed in a hair shirt and habit.<sup>95</sup>

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90 Nilsson 1989, 91, 244, 249–252, 289; Daniell 1997, 103; Carlsson 1972, 136–140.

91 Almquist 1926, 21–22.

92 Cohn 1988, 61. See also Daniell 1997, 31–32.

93 Nilsson 1989, 230–231. See also Lansing 2008, 50.

94 E.g., Weiss-Krejci 2008; Gittings 1984, 104–105, 166–171, 216.

95 Daniell 1997, 30–31.

Yet, in addition to this, one must allow for individual preferences.<sup>96</sup> Some high-status testators wished to underline their humility or penitential rigour. For example, a Sieneese nobleman ordered that he be buried “without funerary pomp” (*senza pompa funebre*) in the simple robes of a Flagellant brother.<sup>97</sup> Henry the Young King (1155–1183) was anxious to be reconciled to his father, Henry II of England (r. 1154–1189) on his deathbed for his rebellion. After falling seriously ill, he demonstrated his penitence by lying naked on the floor in front of a crucifix. After his death, Prince Henry was placed on ashes and sackcloth, with a noose around his neck and with stones under his head and feet to demonstrate his dying a penitent.<sup>98</sup> The French nobleman and soldier Philippe de Mézières (ca. 1327–1405) wished to have iron chains around his neck at death. Instead of being carried on a bier, he wanted to be stripped naked and hauled by the feet to the church. His body was to be roped to a plank and cast into a grave “like carrion.”<sup>99</sup>

The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I took this even further. He instructed that his dead corpse receive an unusual and morbid penitential treatment and after this, be displayed to demonstrate that death was the lot of all men – even glorious rulers. Maximilian’s hair was to be cut off, his teeth pulled out, his body whipped and covered with ash and lime. The body was to be buried together with burning coals. Indeed, this seems to have been what happened. The practically toothless skeleton had been buried under lime together with twig whips.<sup>100</sup>

These were individual funerary wishes of an unusual kind. However, in the case of criminals, burial rites were usually not a question of individual choice. The cruel shaming and public deaths at the hands of an executioner were set as “cautionary deaths” to large audiences in order to provide just retribution and deter others from similar criminal paths.<sup>101</sup> The treatment of the bodies of criminals after death followed suit. In Paris, the body parts of the “false traitor Colinet de Puiseux,” beheaded on 12 November 1411, had been exhibited as deterrents: the head stuck upon a spear, the torso on the gallows and the four limbs over the main gates of Paris. When these body parts were taken down for burial nearly two years later, the anonymous Parisian journal-writer considered execution and dismemberment too lenient a punishment. He thought that instead of being buried, Colinet’s “body should have been burned or given to the dogs, not put into hallowed ground,” even if that would not have been a Christian thing to do.<sup>102</sup>

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96 See also Gittings 1984, 36–37, 39.

97 Cohn 1988, 179–180.

98 Daniell 1997, 160.

99 Binski 1996, 133.

100 Weiss-Krejci 2008, 186.

101 Boyden 1999, 242–243.

102 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley 1968, 59–60, 81.

Precisely because of this, revenge-killing could include the mutilation and desecration of the cadavers. Preventing the murdered bodies being prepared for death by relatives or, worse, having them defiled by animals was also a way to dehumanise them and cause them further dishonour. The treatment of the massacred corpses of the so-called “Cruel Carnival” of Udine in Friuli in 1511 was heavy with symbolism. The pursuit and butchering of noble political opponents and members of their households was linked with hog slaughter and hunting. Some corpses were cut up “like beef,” while others were thrown into wells and latrines. Many mutilated cadavers, some rendered quite unidentifiable, were left in the streets for days so that the pigs and dogs would eat them while relatives were prevented from retrieving them.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, the bodies of several notables, including those of Count Bernard VII of Armagnac (1360–1418), massacred in Paris during civil strife, had been buried “in a big rubbish dump.” Only in 1436 were the bones honourably reburied in a nearby church, while the Count’s remains had their resting-place in the more privileged location of its choir.<sup>104</sup>

Disrespectful or indifferent treatment of their corpses was something those who had committed particularly abhorrent crimes could expect. Yet, in displaying the grisly cadavers of executed criminals, gender played a bigger role than the status of the dead. Christine Ekholst has discussed the gendered punishments passed upon those sentenced to death. She has pointed out that visible shaming was especially poignant when it came to the death sentences of men: “The male body in life, as in death, was public.” Male punishments aimed especially at exposing the dead body of the criminal – as a warning sign, while female criminals were more often destroyed by fire or covered by earth, because their dead bodies were considered impure and were also dreaded.<sup>105</sup>

Demonstrative and differentiating treatment of criminals in death followed in burial. For example, the Anglo-Saxon laws demonstrated a concern for the final resting place of wrong-doers of various kinds. In addition, special cemeteries for executed criminals have been discovered in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>106</sup> As Anne Irene Riisøy points out in her article in this current volume, the death and burial of an outlaw was a special process. The dead body of the criminal was considered a danger to the community, and part of the punishment was denying an outlaw Christian burial.

This again reflects parallel cultures. In this sense, the body of an outlaw can be compared to that of those killed by lightning, suicides or unbaptised children, whose souls could neither enter the world of the deceased nor become incorporated into the society of the dead. Wishing to be “reincorporated into the world of the living”

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103 Muir 1998, 94–97, 113–119, 133–134, 138–139

104 *A Parisian Journal 1405–1449*, trans. and ed. Shirley (1968), 309.

105 Ekholst 2009, 274–276, 292–293.

106 E.g., Thompson 2004, 172–180; Buckberry 2008, 148–168

but being denied this, these homeless and wandering souls became malevolent. “These [were] the most dangerous dead.”<sup>107</sup> Some Icelandic sagas also discuss ghosts and restless dead harming the living, although this could be prevented by certain burial rituals through which hauntings could be made to cease.<sup>108</sup> For example, medieval popular belief could consider paying for masses for the deceased a necessity, because otherwise the spirits of the dead, as their ghostly doubles, would haunt the living, especially around cemeteries.<sup>109</sup> Some of the aggressive ghosts and revenants who had been criminals and excommunicates in life could be put to rest by absolution or had to be prevented from returning by destroying their corpses by burning or driving spikes through their bodies.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, in burying outlaws, medieval Norwegians paid special attention to choosing the site of burial, so that the community would not be tainted. The outlaws belonged neither to the earth, nor to the water and were to be placed outside the society even in death. However, no principle was without exceptions, and Riisøy discusses the debates on the burials of outlaws, also revealing the change and fluctuations in burial principles. In cases of burials of outlaws, suicides and suspected witches, pagan practices and popular belief obviously collided with the more sober views of the Catholic Church. Canon law contented itself with forbidding excommunicates from being buried in the Church’s cemeteries and, if already buried, their bones had to be exhumed (*exhumari debent*) provided they could be identified among the other corpses. In fact, the papal decretal on the subject was addressed to the archbishop of Nidaros (present-day Trondheim) indicating, as Riisøy has remarked, that the burial of outlaws and excommunicates was a topical question in Norway at the time.<sup>111</sup> However, the separation of excommunicates from ordinary burial grounds went on long into the early modern era, as even English examples show.<sup>112</sup>

Another sign of parallel cultures shows how the official church norms of dealing with those killed in tournaments was followed in practice. The stance of the Church was that tournaments were forbidden. If anyone died in such combat, he was to be denied ecclesiastical burial (*sepultura ecclesiastica*) if he had entered it with a wish to fight (*si accessit animo pugnandi*).<sup>113</sup> This ban was almost universally disregarded in medieval Europe.<sup>114</sup> This example reminds us of how crucial it is not to assume that normative sources automatically reflected everyday practices.

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107 Van Gennep 1960 (1909), 160–161. See also Caciola 1996.

108 E.g., Kanerva (forthcoming). See also, McConchie 1982, 482–483.

109 Binski 1996, 139.

110 Caciola 1996, 21, 23, 27–29.

111 X 3.28.12 in *Corpus iuris canonici* 2, ed. Friedberg (1881): Title: “*Si ossa excommunicatorum sunt sepulta in ecclesiastico coemeterio, et discerni possunt, debent exhumari et proiici; alias secus.*”

112 Gittings 1984, 76–77.

113 X 5.13.1–2 in *Corpus iuris canonici* 2, ed. Friedberg (1881).

114 Daniell 1997, 104–105.

As tournaments, dispersed burials and embalming demonstrate, noble traditions and an aristocratic way of life created and preserved parallel cultures of death and dying regardless of the notions of the official Church. Some such elite traditions even survived changes of religion. In Reformed countries, the dissolution of the monasteries meant that many noble families lost access to the monastic abbey churches or priories where the tombs and funerary monuments of their ancestors had been erected. During an early phase of the English Reformation, tombs – even royal ones – were officially destroyed even if some nobles were successful in rescuing their family graves. In Scotland, where the Reformed church forbade burials within church buildings, some families continued to use their traditional monastic burial sites, which had lost their former role, for many decades.<sup>115</sup>

The dissolution of monasteries was only one of the changes caused by the Reformation in death-related practices. Many Catholic traditions were denounced as unbiblical Papist superstitions.<sup>116</sup> After the Reformation, the rejection of purgatory naturally also eradicated the necessity of intercession from the living to the agonised soul in purgatory. Consequently, the prayers of the living on behalf of the deceased were curtailed. Ralph Houlbrooke has observed that there were fewer services and a temporal concentration of the obsequies. The process of interment, including the funeral service delivered by the priest, was transformed from a means of assisting the deceased in purgatory to a means to teach and comfort the living.<sup>117</sup> A very material change in the ceremonies brought about by the Reformation was the disappearance of extreme unction as a sacrament and part of the deathbed rituals. As a consequence, the presence of clerics at the deathbed was not as necessary in Protestant regions as before, which reduced their influence on the will-making and led to a “secularisation of the will.”<sup>118</sup>

In early sixteenth-century England, two death-related *causes célèbres* had provoked anticlerical feelings and escalated into disputes about the powers of ecclesiastical officials and the immunities of the Church. In 1511, Richard Hunne (d. 1514), a London merchant tailor, had refused to pay the mortuary fee after the death of his small baby son. Cited eventually to an ecclesiastical court, he countered by challenging the powers of the ecclesiastical court in a secular court. Hunne was found hanged in his cell in 1514 – apparently a rigged suicide – after being arrested for heresy. The Church had Hunne convicted in a post-mortem trial, and his corpse was burned, but his death was pronounced to be murder and the family recovered his forfeited property.<sup>119</sup>

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115 Daniell 1997, 200–201; Spicer 1999.

116 E.g., Gittings 1984, 39–49.

117 Houlbrooke 1989b, 29–32; Helt 1999, 194.

118 Houlbrooke 1989b, 29–32.

119 Haigh 1993, 77–83.

Another famous case was triggered by a will made by William Tracy in 1530, in which he stated his belief in his salvation by God's grace and the merits of Jesus instead of relying on prayers, masses and intercessions. Accordingly, no property was willed to ecclesiastical institutions. Copies of the will circulated, and it was pronounced heretical in 1532. Consequently, Tracy's corpse was exhumed, because the body of a heretic could not remain in consecrated ground. However, in ordering that it be burned, the ecclesiastical official overstepped the jurisdiction of the Church and was punished.<sup>120</sup> Thus, bodies living and dead formed religious politics in the pre-Reformation years.

In sixteenth-century France, funerals became the battleground between the Catholic and Reformed faiths. The bodies of Huguenots, as French Calvinists were called, were defiled, exhumed or refused proper burial because of their heresy and refusal to adhere to the true Catholic faith. Thus, the cadavers of Huguenots – like those of outlaws, suicides and excommunicates – were separated from the rest of the community and excluded from the hallowed communal cemeteries. As a result of these bans on burials in cemeteries, some Protestants were claimed to have embalmed the corpses of their deceased and kept them at home. This was perceived to be “against humanity,” and in 1563, after some uneasy years, Huguenots were allowed to establish unobtrusive burial grounds outside the towns. However, their funerals were restricted: the number of attendants could be thirty at the most and the interment could only take in the darkness of the hours between dusk and dawn.<sup>121</sup>

In post-Reformation England, excommunicates were sometimes buried nocturnally in the churchyard either clandestinely or by permission if, in the latter case, the excommunicates were Catholics. At the same time, the 1610s saw the rise of an aristocratic fashion for night-time funerals with torch processions, nocturnal services and interments. For some, such nocturnal funerals represented a more individual, personal and less formal burial.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the exceptional time of the funerary ritual that was meant to brand some deceased as excluded deviants became the vogue among the elite. Nocturnal funerals came to send different signals, depending on social class.

Even among Protestants, the rise of religious sects within the Protestant church may have influenced funeral customs as Houlbrooke has argued for the English Puritans who advocated simplicity. “Many puritans were hostile to lavish expenditure, especially on the outward trappings of mourning, because it was wasteful and often seemed hypocritical.” This may have been a reaction to the exorbitant interment expenses of the English aristocracy, “marking the zenith of expenditure on funerals”

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120 Haigh 1993, 70–72.

121 Roberts 1999, 131–148.

122 Gittings 1984, 76–77, 188–192.

during some decades around 1500.<sup>123</sup> For example, various Protestant groups – as well as Catholics – had somewhat differing funerary customs in post-Reformation England.<sup>124</sup>

Thus it may still be appropriate to talk about cultures of death and dying in the plural rather than one uniform culture even for Reformed regions. Similarly, many popular beliefs regarding the souls of the dead lived on until the modern era.

All in all, the articles in this volume show that local and interregional cultures of death and dying were intertwined, in constant interaction, and experienced individually even in a time known for its collective mindset. Beliefs about bodies and spirits were labelled pagan and superstitious first by the Catholic and later, by the Reformed Churches as well. Side by side with Catholic beliefs and practices, heretical customs were covertly observed. After the Reformation, these could become more visible and even clash with the dominant culture. Changes in funeral fashions could also develop into parallel customs.

While the Reformation led to the abolition of many strong death-related traditions such as masses for the dead, others were simply remodelled and reinterpreted in accordance with the new tenets. In other instances, the social functions of the customs were considered so important as to carry them over religious turmoil and change. The accepted expressions of emotion may have been culturally determined, but the feelings of fear, loss and grief in face of the inescapable death were largely universal in medieval and early modern Europe.

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123 Gittings 1984, 25–26, 48–53; Houlbrooke 1989b, 34, 37.

124 Gittings 1984, 39–59.

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