

How do we account for the changes observable in the commemoration of the dead in Italy and Northern Europe in this period?

‘Death is as much for the living as for the dead.’¹ A consideration of the processes of commemoration of the dead in any period may well lead one to draw similar conclusions to this statement of St Augustine’s. Especially when we make these considerations in the context of today’s culture, we could be forgiven for assuming that it has always been the case that the primary reason for remembering someone who has passed away is for the comfort and consolation of the living they leave behind. Such is today’s mentality towards death. The changes to commemoration which were apparent in Early Renaissance Italy and Northern Europe, however, cannot lean on such a simple explanation. The key to our understanding in this case is to remember that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, death was a far more accepted part of everyday life and religion than we allow it to be today, and so attitudes towards it differed accordingly.² Society’s reasons for beginning to commemorate its dead in a new manner were arguably complex and reflected changes to mentalities which society as a whole was experiencing on a wider scale.

Securing a good understanding of how methods of commemoration did change, it becomes immediately obvious that there are clear trends pointing towards explanations accounting for their occurrence. The sources generally used by historians, apart from physical evidence like tombs and monuments, are the last wills and testaments left by individuals. Such documents, because of pressures placed upon the testators by law and accepted social practice, were socially determined products and so are especially useful when conducting investigations such as this.³ One of the most obvious changes to occur was in the nature of burial sites. Increasingly in testaments, there appeared the tendency to elect your own burial site, as well as to mark the said site in some way so that a

¹ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1996), p.165

² John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the later Middle Ages* (Routledge, London, 2001), p.182

³ Samuel Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.16

passer-by would know exactly who was buried there.⁴ In particular, gothic tombs with effigies of the deceased surrounded by close kin praying for them emerged in the thirteenth century and were very much a product of the changes of this period.⁵ Cohn has argued that the movement towards this new practice was more obvious in Northern Europe than in the South, but nonetheless there was a general positive trend evident in both areas.⁶ Such change amounted to a major movement away from the Medieval practice of mass burial in undifferentiated graves. Specification of burial sites and the clearer demarcation and therefore personalisation of the memorials found on such sites was a major figure in the change in commemoration practices. Along similar lines, commissions of not only funerary art to be displayed on or along side ones tomb, but also of religious works commissioned more generally, increasingly bore images of their patrons, so that when a passer-by gazed upon the piece, whether it was directly connected to that patrons burial site or not, they would be called to mind and remembered.⁷ The nature of charitable giving as displayed in testaments was also undergoing change, again in what can be described as a move on the part of the donator to more obviously commemorate themselves. After the return of the plague to Europe in 1368, Cohn has highlighted that such giving as is evident in testaments became less splintered and liquidated, being left in small amounts to a series of charitable institutions, as was the medieval practice, and grew to become more focused on single recipients as people began to look to leave their mark in this world.⁸ Derenaucourt has highlighted that funerals also changed, becoming more ‘flamboyant’, especially in the North.⁹ Indeed, the evidence of funerals such as that held for Adolf of Cleves, Lord of Ravenstein, in 1492 corroborates this notion, as well as acting as further proof of the increase in the

⁴ Samuel Cohn, ‘The Place of the Dead in Flanders and Tuscany: Towards a Comparative History of the Black Death’, in Bruce Gordon & Peter Marshall (eds.), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, UK, 2000), pp.26-7

⁵ McGee Morganstern, Anne, *Gothic Tombs of Kinship in France, the Low Countries and England* (Pennsylvania State University Press, USA, 2000), pp.6-7

⁶ Cohn, ‘The Place of the Dead in Flanders and Tuscany’, p.29

⁷ *Ibid*, p.40

⁸ Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death*, pp.17-8

⁹ Cohn, ‘The Place of the Dead in Flanders and Tuscany’, p.20

need for remembrance, with its huge amounts of heraldry, for example.¹⁰ Changes are evident too, if not in the nature of the fabric of masses for the dead, then certainly in their number. Their volume in this period increased manifold.¹¹ The language of memory came to be used heavily in such cases, with obsequies being referred to as ‘minds’ or remembrances, and in the increasing numbers of prayers recited in memory of the dead.¹² All of the above examples point to a clear change in the nature of commemoration of the dead during the early Renaissance throughout Europe, especially to increases in its volume and regularity. But how do we account for such change?

One theme which is clear is an increasing individualisation of commemoration. In the election, demarcation and individualisation of tombs through the likes of monuments and art, we see clearly a move to personalise the memory of the dead.¹³ It is also illustrated in the tendency, more marked in the North than in Italy but nonetheless evident throughout Europe, to increasingly be laid to rest away from family tombs and as an individual, perhaps with an accompanying memorial involving ancestors, but generally only stretching to no more than one or two generations.¹⁴ These amount to a marked change from the practice at the end of the twelfth century when the tendency in death was towards anonymity, and so commemoration of the dead was made in more general terms rather than, as we see in the following centuries, focused on the named and identified individual. Such change fits with arguments put forward, especially by Burckhardt when discussing early Renaissance Italy, suggesting that there was an increasing sense of individualism emerging as part of a new Renaissance mentality. A major part of this new psychology was a preoccupation with the fame and glory of the individual.¹⁵ Although it is widely accepted that such ideas as Burckhardt’s relate primarily to Italy, Chiffolleau has identified a more Northern ideology of individualism based

¹⁰ M. Vale, ‘A Burgundian Funeral Ceremony: Olivier de la Marche and the Obsequies of Adolf of Cleves, Lord of Ravenstein’, *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), p.938

¹¹ McGee Morganstern, *Gothic Tombs of Kinship*, p.5

¹² Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992), pp.327-8, p.369

¹³ *Ibid*, p.333

¹⁴ Cohn, ‘The Place of the Dead in Flanders and Tuscany’, pp.34-8

¹⁵ Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death*, p.28

more upon fear caused by war, plague and dislocation from family bases and which was part of what he called the 'Great Melancholy'.¹⁶ It is justified, then, to argue that this personalised nature of commemoration was fuelled by a new individualistic psychology, whether due to, as Cohn has so succinctly put it 'Burckhardtian bravado or northern fragility'.¹⁷ And how did this lead to a change in the commemoration of the dead? The answer is again well illustrated by the funeral, mentioned briefly already, of Adolf of Cleves. A description of the event portrays the highly personalised and glorifying nature of the ceremony including heavy use of heraldry and ceremonies honouring the dead Count's achievements.¹⁸ What we can see caused by this increasing individualism, then, is the development of what we can call a 'selfish' nature of remembrance, whereby men wished their memory to be kept alive purely to serve their own newly-developed egotistical nature and fear of leaving the material world behind. This led them to make provisions to ensure that their name lived on, even though they could not.

This idea of attachment to the material world leads to a related point. For centuries before the early renaissance, monastic communities throughout Europe already devoted a great deal of time to remembering the dead in prayer.¹⁹ The early Renaissance, however, saw a change in the very nature of piety and therefore in the ways in which it was deemed necessary and therefore made possible to commemorate the dead. The changes above form part of what can be described as the secularisation of piety, whereby it moved away from monastic ascetic ideals towards a greater concern with the material world.²⁰ This is expressed in the changing nature of charitable giving evident in testaments. Traditionally, testators would spread their remaining worldly wealth across a number of deserving charities upon their death in an attempt to dilute it and so loosen their grip on the material world of their living days, thus speeding up their transition into the afterlife. As we have seen, during the early renaissance this concern was replaced with that which focused upon leaving obvious reminders of

¹⁶ Cohn, 'The Place of the Dead in Flanders and Tuscany', p.19

¹⁷ Ibid, p.34

¹⁸ Vale, 'A Burgundian Funeral Ceremony'

¹⁹ McGee Morganstern, *Gothic Tombs of Kinship*, p.4

²⁰ Cohn, 'The Place of the Dead in Flanders and Tuscany', p.19

your life by focusing charitable donations upon one source. Changes in piety, then, led to increased attachment to the material world. The cult for the intercession for the dead could prolong their presence in communities.²¹ Then by preserving their achievements in monuments to their memory, mainly found on or near their graves, and by leaving visible marks of their generosity and charity rather than being purposely discreet, the dying could leave this world safe in the knowledge that they had preserved their repute, achievements and place in it.²²

There is a further explanation for the changes, though, which is far more religious and less secularised than those already explored. Throughout the twelfth century, the European sense of purgatory increased.²³ Society knew that after death they would have to spend time in a place of suffering to atone for their sins, thus cleansing themselves for entry into heaven. Alongside this, there grew terrifying images of purgatory with the idea of the apocalypse, especially heightened in Northern Europe.²⁴ All of this meant that those ideas and images looming large in the lay awareness of death and therefore underlying the cult of remembrance weren't encouraging.²⁵ Such an image of the attitudes of the period serve to highlight Huizinga's arguments that society was obsessed with a morbid sense of death, stressing its inevitability and the need to ensure safe passage through purgatory, although it has been argued that what we are actually witnessing here is the unfolding of the theme rather than its invention.²⁶ In either instance, as Boarse has pointed out, much of the certainty of earlier times was gone.²⁷ What this development led to was a more urgent need for prayers for the repose of the deceased's souls. As much as you could achieve during your own lifetime towards shortening your stay in purgatory though the building up of merit was never enough to allow you to by-pass it completely. The dead were therefore utterly dependent on the goodwill and

²¹ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p.303

²² T.S.R. Boarse, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgement and Remembrance* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1972), p.73

²³ McGee Morganstern, *Gothic Tombs of Kinship*, p.5

²⁴ Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p.193

²⁵ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p.338

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp.305-6

²⁷ Boarse, *Death in the Middle Ages*, p.39

help of the living which bred a fear of being forgotten.²⁸ We see attempts to be remembered to this end in, for example, the emergence of cadaver tombs whose display of decomposing corpses sought to evoke fellow-feeling and pity for the occupant, thus securing a passer-by's prayers, or in a testator leaving money for a chalice or vestments for their local parish to link their name to community worship.²⁹ Essentially, then, this argument holds that the nature of commemoration in Europe at this time changed because it had to. Doctrinally, the ever-increasing presence of purgatory and its torments meant that it became more pressing for people to be remembered after their death in order to shorten their stay there. This is arguably a central and underlying concern of the period, and perhaps we should consider the possibility that it was this change which was largely fuelling the increasing individualisation and secularisation of commemoration.

As a part of the new mentalities developing in one form or another throughout Europe at this time, it became natural to want to be remembered as a successful individual rather as opposed to one of an unnamed mass of bodies, due to an apparently new self-awareness. In these terms we can explain quite concisely the changes evident in how an individual was commemorated after their death. However, it is clear that the explanation for changes in *why* they wished to be remembered runs deeper. Primary concerns here, springing from a newfound heightened awareness of what happened to the soul after death, were focused upon limiting the time one had to spend in purgatory. One was more likely to be prayed for by continuing to assert your presence in this world despite being gone from it. We could call this new manner of commemoration self-concerned, forced and perhaps even selfish. That this commemoration became more extensively individualised was connected less to changes in popular mentalities connected directly to death, and was more a natural product of the changes to wider ideas of the age. Clearly, individualised remembrance was highly beneficial: it allowed for more focused prayer, which, presumably, was held to be far more effective. But we could conclude that behind all of these more complex accounts explaining changes to

²⁸ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p.328

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.307, 3, p.330

commemoration, there ultimately lay the desire to make ones time in the afterlife as easy as possible. Ultimately, whether society in the early renaissance felt the need to be remembered as glorified individuals, or were simply reluctant to let go of the life they knew, the driving force behind the need to be remembered was the ever-present and increasing awareness of purgatory.

9

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