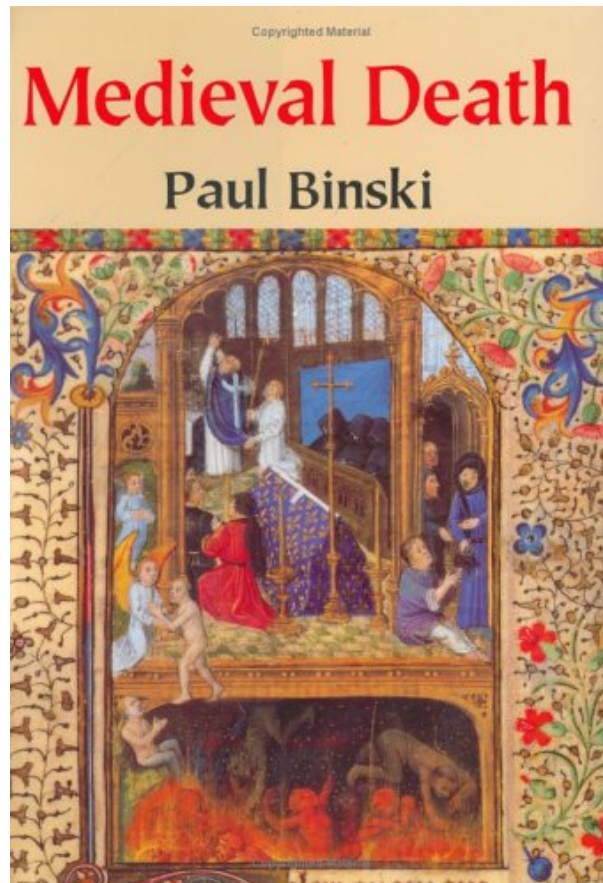


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Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation

A history of the cultural interpretation of death during the Middle Ages, with a focus on religious rituals and artistic representations.

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A useful read in some parts but impenetrably dense in others

By Whitt Patrick Pond

Paul Binski's *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* is something of a mixed bag. What the reader will get out of it largely depends on what the reader is looking for and what the reader's particular background is. It is helpful to think of the book being presented as described in the subtitle, i.e. medieval death in terms of its ritual in actual life and in terms of its representation in art, literature and religious philosophy and thought.

For myself, I felt Binski's presentation was distinctly more accessible in the first half of the book where he deals with how Christianity of the early medieval period affected how death was viewed and dealt with in Europe, particularly with regard to the rituals of burial, the increasing importance and evolving roles of tombs and of the relics of saints. I learned quite a bit that I was not previously aware of.

For example, the problem that developed regarding tombs in cathedrals and other religious institutions. Initially burials within churches were strictly prohibited, which was a problem in that everyone wanted to be buried within the church as that was considered the most sacred ground. And things being what they were, it was difficult for even the church to say no to kings, so initially exceptions were made for monarchs. Which in turn led to exceptions being made for well-regarded bishops and abbots, which led to exceptions being made for the higher nobility, and eventually to rich merchants. All of which led to the problem of increasing numbers of medieval churches, cathedrals, abbeys and such becoming so cluttered with tombs that it became difficult for them to fulfill their original function of conducting religious services. The book is well-illustrated and includes photographs that illustrate the increasingly elaborate tomb designs that, however

impressive, only served to add to the clutter.

Another particularly interesting section dealt with the role of effigies in dealing with the death of kings:

"The death of a monarch was a means of disclosing and enforcing forms of power.... When... a king died, an elaborate series of rituals was developed to guarantee the transference of power, and to cancel the inevitable anxieties which arose at such points of passage. In the case of royal burial... the principal strategic problem was where power was located in the period between the death of one monarch and the inauguration of the next. ... In the interim phase after the death of a monarch, the body politic could be incorporated not in a person at all but in an image: a funeral effigy, which could be ritually respected as if it were the king itself.... The power of such images is demonstrated in France by the fact that the Dauphin, the heir to the throne whose reign had notionally begun at his father's death, could not be seen with the image of his father lest two kings should be seen to rule in this state of political liminality."

The section dealing with what evolved as a cult of the relics of saints clarified for me why they were so prized. In medieval belief, formed as it was by the Christian belief in the ultimate literal resurrection of the body, the souls of saints were still connected to the remains of their earthly bodies. And so prayers given in the vicinity of those remains were more likely to be heard by the saints and then passed on to God. In the simplest terms, the relics of saints were regarded as something on the order of a direct hot-line to God, which is why they were so highly prized to the point that one sometimes had the rather unseemly spectacle of clergy and monks of rival institutions sometimes brawling in the streets over who should get the remains of recently deceased religious figures thought to be likely candidates for sainthood.

When the book's focus shifts to the matter of representation, however, the prose becomes increasingly dense and unless the reader has a fairly substantial interest, and background, in matters of medieval art, literature and religious philosophy, particularly with regards to the issue of purgatory in those areas to which Binski devotes a great deal of attention, the lay reader is apt to become somewhat numbed by the inaccessibility and unlikely to gain much from it. An example of the style in this section would be this:

"Nevertheless, it's fairly clear that to understand the why and when of the transi tomb, we have to sidestop this literary component, tempting as it may be to see the textual elements of such tombs as offering a simple key to their iconography and signification. Transi tombs are regarded too often as a transparent form of text - as the visual equivalent to a literary culture of guilt and penance, as sermons in stone -- with multiple points of reference to a substantial body of thought, to which they are related as second-order epiphenomena. Owsen long ago noted that the character of admonitions of the 'such shalt thou be' type were common in Mendicant-inspired sermonizing on death in the tradition going back at least to St. Bernard. But there is no reason to assume from this that tombs of this type were essentially like sermons: their didacticism was much more class-specific."

Overall, I would recommend this book as at least partly worth reading for anyone interested in medieval burial and tombs, in how Christianity affected how people thought of death in relation to the soul and the body, and in particular how cults arose around the relics of saints and how tombs inside cathedrals and monasteries became a serious space problem over the centuries. Beyond that however, I would only recommend it for readers with an interest and background in medieval art and religious thought and in how death was viewed in those veins.

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