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978-0-521-00974-4 - The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500-1670

Vanessa Harding

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

A wide plain, apparently of churned mud, stretched almost to the horizon, bounded by the tall buildings of the twentieth-century city. In the distance mechanical diggers and hard-hatted workmen circled purposefully. In the foreground, the top layers of earth had been stripped off, to expose a profusion of human remains, a seeming jumble of skulls, vertebrae, and limb-bones. Looking more carefully, one could see that this was not in fact a pit or mass grave, with bodies tossed in anyhow. The skeletons were mostly laid out and oriented east–west in single graves, but these overlay and intercut each other in a dense pattern of use and re-use of the space. The ground had been opened frequently and repeatedly to accommodate successive burials, and each new cut must have exposed at best quite significant skeletal remains and at worst decomposing bodies. The residue of earlier burials had been shovelled aside to make way for new ones, so that the bones of scores of individuals were contained in this small space. The possibility that a similar density of burial material stretched further in all directions daunted the imagination.

This was the scene at Broad Street in the city of London in early 1986, as archaeologists from the Department of Urban Archaeology made the most of their opportunity to investigate the site, between the demolition of the nineteenth-century Broad Street railway station and the erection of the late twentieth-century Broadgate development.¹ A visitor to the excavation, I was both shocked and fascinated. For the first time I was brought literally face to face with one of the material realities of life in early modern London, the shortage of space to bury the dead, and the way in which it was handled. Further investigation of the antecedents of

¹ MoLAS site reference LSS 85. For the early modern use of the New Churchyard, see below, chapter 3. The burial ground went out of use in the mid-eighteenth century, appears to have been divided up as gardens for the surrounding houses by 1793, and was wholly built over by Broad Street Station by 1865. See H. A. Harben, *A dictionary of London* (London, 1908), pp. 70, 107, 356; CLRO, Comptroller's City Lands Plans, 142, 270; CLRO, Plans, Railways: North London Railway, City Branch, 1860 (678F, plan 122).

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this site, which proved to be the New Churchyard established in 1569, raised a range of questions: how far was the initiative to create this burial ground typical of civic attitudes to burial and the safe disposal of bodies in that time and place? What factors determined who was buried there? Who managed burial in early modern London?

These specific questions led me to the burgeoning literature on death, and to the now widely shared recognition that the study of death can offer insights into the much broader area of the structure and relations of historical societies. This has long been accepted as a valid approach to understanding prehistoric and ancient societies, in which death rituals and burial practices are seen as exemplifying and reinforcing social formations, and as an important mechanism for ensuring social continuity and recovery in the face of mortality. The growing body of writings on death, mortuary practices, and eschatology in more modern periods suggested that major insights could be gained in this area too. As a result, I began to consider what part the experience of mortality and the management of burial played in shaping urban community and culture, especially in the medieval and early modern periods. I was particularly interested in the large and complex metropolitan context, where individuals had multiple identities and foci of loyalty, and where the interests and wishes of the state impinged upon local or municipal governmental interests. An issue of particular significance appeared to be the location of burial, and the decisions made about where burial could take place in the crowded physical environment of the early modern city. The questions that principally presented themselves to me as a historian of London included asking: who, or what interests, determined where any individual was buried? What practices evolved to deal with the problem of thousands – in some years, tens of thousands – of bodies to be buried? What rituals were devised to temper this brutal reality, and how were they reshaped over time? How much did this all cost, and can the value or success of a particular repertoire of responses be assessed? What do the ways in which these problems were addressed tell us about the society, its preoccupations, its capacity for responding to social issues and crises? And what other discourses – of identity, community, hierarchy, power, privacy, consumption – were involved in dealing with the irreducibly material fact of death?

This book arises from those questions, and attempts to address them by investigating the material reality of death in the early modern city. It is intended as an exploration in urban history: to show that study of the practices surrounding death and burial can make an important contribution to understanding urban culture and experience. It is not a discussion of death as an ontological phenomenon, of attitudes to dying, or

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the negotiations with the hereafter; it is more an investigation of what it meant, in practical terms, to deal with death on a scale wholly unfamiliar to modern western societies. Responses to death, in the form of burial practices and funeral rituals, are clearly bound up with issues of personal and family or community identity, geography and the use of space, control of the physical environment, and the ordering of society and social behaviour. All of these topics are of central importance for the urban historian; their significance can only have been magnified by the huge scale of mortality in the early modern city. Death rates were commonly three to four times those prevalent now, and for some categories such as children, and during epidemics, were many times higher. I would argue that death played a particularly significant role in early modern urban societies, which experienced more and more-frequent deaths; lost more of their social and cultural capital to death; and faced a greater problem in disposing of the dead, than many others have done.

The topic invites comparative study, since all pre-modern cities and metropolises must have experienced similar problems, but reacted to them in characteristically and perhaps significantly different ways. The most appropriate comparator for early modern London is not another British city, but Paris. Though some differences are immediately apparent, the two had many features in common. One of the most important similarities between them is their great size: both appear to have reached and passed 450,000 inhabitants by 1670, making them the two largest cities in northern Europe and among the largest in the world known to contemporary Europeans. As the capitals of centralising nation-states, both cities were the foci of power and its contestation at many levels; they were at the centre of systems that drew in and redistributed goods and profits produced nationally; they were places where different value systems met, clashed, and modified each other. By this period both had a history of centuries of development and redevelopment on the same spot, resulting in a congested urban plan that was invested with meanings derived from traditional uses and ownerships but modified by newer practices. Each of the two was often conceived and represented, visually or verbally, as a unity, but this unity was belied by jurisdictional incoherence and anomaly on the ground. The size and the varied origins of the metropolitan population created a complex and pluralistic society, in which individuals had multiple identities and loyalties, not all pulling in the same direction. London and Paris shared many of the pressures and problems of urban living with smaller centres, but it is this complexity and multi-focality that puts them in a special category.

In this book, therefore, I examine the history of death and burial in London and Paris in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and ask

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what this can add to our understanding of the divergent histories of these two cities. London was the starting point of the enquiry, and remains the better-documented subject of research, but the information and insights gained from study of Paris have had a major impact on the overall shape and conclusions of the work. Recent historical writing has suggested that early modern London's relative social stability may be attributable to its dynamic and integrative social structure, offering opportunities for participation and advancement, as well as to the suppression or containment of political conflict among the city's rulers.² An obvious question to ask is whether Paris's much more traumatic experience of religious and political strife was in part the result of weaker social bonds or structures. Paris saw more frequent and savage conflict on the streets and at times the city was completely out of control. Not all forms of authority were challenged, but those that might be characterised as in intention inclusive and conciliatory – that is, the royal and municipal – were. Clearly the contribution of political contest at the national level and the exploitation of factional interests cannot be ignored, but, given the active participation of the people of Paris in large political events and their outcomes, an examination of social structures must be important to this question.³ One way of approaching this huge topic is suggested here: some of the different assumptions and priorities that informed social relations and interactions in London and Paris may be revealed through comparison of their responses to the problem of mortality. The two communities were confronted by the same challenge, of how to survive the practical and psychic impact of enormously high mortality. Both needed to dispose safely of thousands of bodies a year, and to find ways of preserving social bonds and social harmony when death was constantly undermining relations and continuities. Though there are variations in the quality and survival of the documentary sources between the two cities, the topic is at least adequately documented in both, in comparable categories of sources,⁴ and despite the increasing divergence of their political and religious institutions there is still much evidence of the common inheritance

² F. F. Foster, *The politics of stability. A portrait of the rulers in Elizabethan London* (London, 1977); V. Pearl, 'Change and stability in seventeenth-century London', *London Journal* 5 (1979), 3–34; S. Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge, 1989); I. W. Archer, *The pursuit of stability. Social relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991); J. P. Ward, *Metropolitan communities. Trade guilds, identity and change in early modern London* (Stanford, 1997).

³ R. Mousnier, *Paris au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1961); R. Mousnier, 'Recherches sur les structures sociales parisiennes en 1634, 1635, 1636', *Revue Historique* 507 (1973), 35–58; B. Diefendorf, *Paris city councillors in the sixteenth century. The politics of patrimony* (Princeton, 1983); M. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁴ See appendix 5, A note on sources.

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of belief and practice. An important aim of this study, therefore, is to consider whether what we can learn of burial practices in London and Paris can illuminate the different social and political experiences of the two cities in the early modern period, especially as regards social stability versus disorder and fragmentation. This in turn may enable us to reflect on what was generally urban or metropolitan about such practices, and what was specifically local or national. But an equally important question must be whether death was indeed a destabilising factor in the early modern metropolis, as one might expect given its numerical scale, or whether responses to it succeeded in transforming it into a positive and unifying phenomenon, ‘making the networks of order denser’.⁵

The cities indeed shared a long tradition of Christian faith and liturgical observance, but their early modern experiences differed quite dramatically, in that London experienced a relatively peaceful and thoroughgoing Protestant Reformation while Paris was torn by religious strife in the sixteenth century and retained its identity as the most Catholic city at a high cost of violence. Though comparison of the course and outcome of religious Reformation in the two cities is not a primary aim of this study, theological changes obviously affected burial practice. Some of the fundamental assumptions that justified many of the components of the burial ritual were challenged by reformed thought. Traditional rituals of funeral and commemoration took it for granted that specific actions and prayers could accumulate spiritual merit to the benefit of the individual’s salvation, and also that merit was transferable: the living could obtain merit on behalf of the dead. Attention to the place of interment reflected the belief that holiness could be physically located and was accessible through spatial practices, while physical memorials and funeral performances evoked intercession and beneficial prayer. An examination of the extent to which burial practice did in fact change in reformed London, and whether this was really different from developments in Catholic Paris, is an important theme of the book. The impact of religious challenge on the social value of ritual also has significance for the question of stability identified above.

My book’s title, *The dead and the living*, indicates its organising principle. In a real sense it is about the dead rather than death, and specifically the dead of London and Paris. It seeks to locate social responses to the material reality of death in a particular setting: that of the crowded and turbulent worlds of the two largest cities in northern Europe. The book’s strong focus on the location of burial is founded on the belief that the

⁵ M. de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, translated by S. Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 94–5.

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spaces within which funeral rituals and burial took place had an important effect on their form and experienced meaning, and that, reciprocally, ritual uses produced or constituted urban spaces. Equally, it insists on the importance of the social setting, the hierarchical, competitive, dynamic society of the metropolis, struggling to maintain stability in the face of huge population growth, religious and political differences, and gross disparities of wealth and status.

In this context the dead and the living may be seen as separate but interacting categories, needing to occupy the same urban space and to resolve or at least accommodate their different sets of interests and priorities. The dead obviously continued to exist in a physical sense, presenting an immediate problem of hygiene and safety whose resolution could not be delayed. In the longer term, the colonisation of spaces by the dead could get in the way of the needs and priorities of the living community. In a more intangible way, the dead continued to shape the present through the ongoing effects of their testamentary dispositions: an individual's right to control property did not cease with life, and pious and charitable bequests and provision for posterity had an influence far into the future. The living had their current needs to consider, and they tended to put these first, but they necessarily looked towards a time when they themselves would be dead, and aimed to make arrangements accordingly. They also frequently acted as trustees or representatives of the interests of deceased individuals, defending the rights of certain dead over the generality of the living. In spiritual terms, medieval and early modern communities posited a reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead which gave the latter a continuing role in the thoughts and actions of the former.

In discussing 'the dead' we are often shifting between two different understandings of the term, the individual and the category, and even the latter is capable of varied readings. The notion of the dead as an 'age-group' in society⁶ encourages us to view them as one end of a continuum of human existence, rather than as wholly separate from it, a state to which all look forward, both for themselves and for society more generally. The dead are therefore as socially differentiated as the living: they include male, female, rich, poor, powerful, dependent, old, young. Throughout this book I have tried always to acknowledge the dead both as a single human category and also as several contrasting social categories. For every autonomous, economically and socially empowered, articulate and

⁶ Attributed by Peter Marshall and Bruce Gordon to Natalie Zemon Davis, 'borrowing and building on a suggestion of André Varagnac': 'Introduction', p. 6, to B. Gordon and P. Marshall (eds.), *The place of the dead. Death and remembrance in late medieval and early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2000).

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discriminating individual (usually the adult male householder) there were many not so privileged: women, children, servants, paupers, strangers, criminals, and excommunicates. None of these received identical treatment in their burial and funeral, in place, ceremony, or memorialisation. Drawing distinctions between the dead was a formative and revealing activity on the part of the urban community.⁷

This focus on the dead contrasts with, but I hope complements, the approaches of other historians of death. Many important works, including, most recently, Ralph Houlbrooke's major study of *Death, religion and the family in England*⁸ and David Cressy's of *Birth, marriage and death*,⁹ have enormously enriched our understanding of the way in which death was understood by individual human subjects in the past. With a wealth of research and detail, they have shown how complex, how simultaneously universal and particular, was the early modern experience of death. I have avoided the examination of eschatology and systems of belief, and have little to say on attitudes to death, or on the personal side of the experience, since these issues have already been opened up for discussion, and many questions have been answered. Houlbrooke's discussion of the human and personal aspect of early modern death allows me to take for granted an appreciation of these issues, and my main theme is social practice rather than interiorised experience. In some ways my approach is nearer to Cressy's, and it would have been difficult to assert the importance of local particularities of experience and behaviour, as I aim to do, without the richly detailed context he and others have established.¹⁰

Long ago, French historians began to investigate death, and their findings have been widely influential, especially Philippe Ariès' *The hour of our death*,¹¹ a long sweep through the history of death in western society. The existence of Pierre Chaunu's monumental study, *La mort à Paris: XVIe, XVIIe, XVIIIe siècles*,¹² based on a major programme of collaborative research centred on wills and testamentary discourse, was effectively a precondition for this more comparative and materially based

⁷ See V. Harding, 'Whose body? A study of attitudes towards the dead body in early modern Paris', in Gordon and Marshall, *The place of the dead*, pp. 170–87.

⁸ R. A. Houlbrooke, *Death, religion and the family in England, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1998).

⁹ D. Cressy, *Birth, marriage and death. Ritual, religion and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997).

¹⁰ See also C. Gittings, *Death, burial and the individual in early modern England* (London, 1984); D. Stannard, *The Puritan way of death. A study in religion, culture, and social change* (New York, 1977).

¹¹ P. Ariès, *The hour of our death*, translated by Helen Weaver (London, 1983); originally published in France as *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977); J. McManners, 'Death and the French historians', in J. Whaley (ed.), *Mirrors of mortality: studies in the social history of death* (London, 1981), pp. 107–30.

¹² P. Chaunu, *La mort à Paris: XVIe, XVIIe, XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1978).

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enquiry. Chaunu's book focuses on changing attitudes to death, using both the contemporary literature of the *Ars Moriendi* tradition and the testamentary evidence of the Parisian notarial sources to chart the appearance of a 'new eschatology', a changed apprehension of death and judgement, and the increasing secularisation of death in the eighteenth century. It is not specifically a study of the impact of death on Parisian society. Some aspects of its approach, notably the quantitative analysis of testamentary discourse, are vulnerable to the criticism that they read too literally a source that is textually and generically formulaic; equally, some of the book's larger claims and speculations, about major changes over time, might also be queried.¹³ The present work, using an investigation of the practices associated with death and burial as a way of commenting on the social history of Paris itself, owes a considerable debt to Chaunu's work, and necessarily draws on the *mémoires de maîtrise* of his students, who made numerous individual studies of samples of wills from the notarial archives, but it is designed to answer a different set of questions. It has more in common with the objectives of Jacqueline Thibaut-Payen's *Les morts, l'église et l'état... dans le ressort du Parlement de Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (1977), which explores the politics of death by investigating the administrative and legal framework regulating the management of death and burial in this period and geographical area. Thibaut-Payen's account of the different treatment accorded to the bodies of 'les sauvés' and 'les reprouvés' parallels the major contention of this work that burial was an important occasion for signalling differentiation and relative privilege.¹⁴

The period covered in this study extends from the early sixteenth century to the 1670s. It starts before the Reformation, in order to compare the common religious culture of London and Paris before the onset of religious controversy and to be able to distinguish historical practice from later assertions of 'traditional' usages. The progress and reception of political and theological Reformation are not specifically charted, but nevertheless form an essential background to many of the developments examined here. An issue that recurs in many contexts is the extent to which Protestants accepted, rejected, or revised the practices and rituals of their Catholic past; equally important, though, is how Protestant and reformed-Catholic traditions evolved over time. In the English historical

¹³ Cf. M. Zell, 'The use of religious preambles as a measure of religious belief in the sixteenth century', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 50 (1977), 246–9; McManners, 'Death and the French historians', p. 126.

¹⁴ J. Thibaut-Payen, *Les morts, l'église et l'état: recherches d'histoire administrative sur la sépulture et les cimetières dans le ressort du Parlement de Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1977).

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tradition, one general understanding of the ‘early modern’ period ends with the Restoration or the Revolution, but there are specific reasons for ending this study around 1670. The date marks the effective end of the age of plague in northern Europe, an important milestone. In London, the destruction of most of the city churches in the Fire of 1666, and the subsequent reconfiguring of the ecclesiastical parishes, revised the topography of burial in the city.¹⁵ The contemporary development of non-parochial burial grounds associated with nonconformist communities changed the parameters of burial practice in the capital. In Paris, in 1669, the state stepped in to take a section of the city’s most treasured and iconic burial site, the cemetery of the Innocents, for road widening; at about the same time, the hospital of the Hôtel-Dieu finally accepted the need to find a new burial site outside the city to replace its intramural site at la Trinité, opening one at Clamart in the southern faubourg Saint-Marcel in 1673.¹⁶ By the 1670s, pressure on the Huguenot community was becoming increasingly severe, culminating in the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and the elimination of the most significant non-Catholic community. The year 1670 also marks the beginning of the collection of demographic statistics in France, to which contemporary ‘political arithmeticians’ made a prompt response, drawing useful comparisons between the two cities.¹⁷ Though the discussion is broadly framed by the period *c.* 1520 to *c.* 1670, however, it has sometimes been necessary to stray beyond these dates, either to illustrate medieval or pre-Reformation practice in London, or to fill a gap in the patchy Parisian sources by reference to a later pronouncement or analysis. It would undoubtedly be rewarding to extend the full study beyond the 1670s, but to do so would be to move into a new world. The granting of religious toleration in England and its abandonment in France in the 1680s embodied a significant divergence of approach to dissent and to the notion of an integrated metropolitan and national community. Especially important in late seventeenth-century Paris was the institution of a powerful police system, with jurisdiction affecting public spaces, environmental hygiene, assemblies, order, and discipline, all of them important factors in burial practice.

¹⁵ Cynthia Wall, *The literary and cultural spaces of Restoration London* (Cambridge, 1998), argues for a wholesale reconceptualisation of the city of London as inhabited space after the Fire.

¹⁶ See chapter 3, below.

¹⁷ See especially W. Petty, ‘Two essays in political arithmetick concerning the people, housing, hospitals, etc. of London and Paris’ (1687), reprinted in C. H. Hull (ed.), *The economic writings of Sir William Petty, together with observations on the Bills of Mortality*, 2 vols. (New York, 1963–4), vol. II, pp. 501–13.

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10 The Dead and the Living in Paris and London

The book is structured in two main sections, which deal thematically rather than chronologically with a number of issues. Change over time is obviously a crucial aspect of my endeavour to set the funeral and burial practices of the two societies in their historical context. Pre- and post-Reformation contrasts in London, and the evolution of Catholic practice in Paris, therefore help to shape individual sections within chapters. However, the thematic approach has also meant abandoning the short-term chronology of the human life and the sequence of deathbed, funeral, interment, and post-mortem commemoration which provides a natural structure for many studies of death.

Following this introduction and chapter 2, which concerns the scale of the burial problem and its geographical, social, and administrative setting in the two cities, chapters 3 to 6 begin to consider how that problem was tackled. This section aims to show that we can gain useful insights into a number of important issues by considering the space of the dead. A metaphorised notion of 'space' as a category of enquiry has proved a very productive one for a number of studies, but these in turn have enriched the ways in which we can understand and write about geographical space.¹⁸ Cities are pre-eminently defined as bounded geographical entities, but they are also characterised by a complex internal division and allocation of space, and by sensitivity to access to and use of different spaces. Burial practices are literally grounded in the city and help to reveal graded understandings of spaces as sacred or secular, central or marginal, private or common. The four chapters in this section examine separately and contrast the characteristics of burial in four locations: in parish churchyards; in civic and non-parochial churchyards; in churches; and in private chapels, vaults, and tombs, usually within churches. Each of these spaces had a different burial population, and each exemplifies a different aspect of the relationship between the living and the dead.

Parish churchyards, where the great majority of the urban population were buried, were a location where the interests of the dead were important, but often subordinated to those of the living. As open spaces within crowded cities, they attracted much secular and indeed profane activity. Those who were buried there were from the middling to lower ranks of society, and those in charge of churchyard burial were more easily able to direct and control burial practices there. There was still, however, a sense of community, of the churchyard space as belonging to both living and dead of that parish. The civic and non-parochial churchyards also

¹⁸ Most notably, H. Lefebvre, *The production of space*, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991). For a particularly relevant example of the use of notions of 'space' to structure discussion, see H. Phillips, *Church and culture in seventeenth-century France* (Cambridge, 1997).