

# ***Everybody Dies – The Evolution of Western Attitudes towards Death in the Middle Ages***

By: Lady Beatrice de Winter

## **General Attitudes about *Death***

- I. Familiar simplicity – indifference, resignation, familiarity
- II. Public aspect – death must occur in public or risk shame; unwitnessed deaths seen as shameful or indication of guilt/spiritual transgression.

These attitudes about death persist for roughly 2000 years (0-1900).

## **General Attitudes about *the Dead***

- I. Late Antiquity
  - A. Bodies a source of impurity/abomination
  - B. Fear of the dead returning to confront the living; prayers said TO the dead to appease them.
  - C. Burial typically on roadways/outside of town.
    - i. Often family vaults on private estates
    - ii. Communal
  - D. Death seen as “deep slumber”
- II. Christianity (~4<sup>th</sup> C)
  - A. Early Christianity saw minimal changes to attitudes about the dead – burial still out of town.
    - i. Initially mixed with the pagans and then in separate cemeteries
  - B. First, a shift due to faith in resurrection and worship of martyrs and tombs occurs.
    - i. Pilgrimages to visit the saints
    - ii. Burial *ad sacntos* (“near the tombs of the martyrs”)
    - iii. Reliquaries common
  - C. 680AD – Afterlife involves NO individual judgment/condemnation.
  - D. 12<sup>th</sup> Century –Purgatory begins to develop; grey area between God/church.
  - E. 13<sup>th</sup> Century – Individuals judged by balance of life up to Judgment Day
    - i. Separation of the just and the damned at the Last Judgment.
    - ii. Weighing of souls by Archangel Michael
  - F. Ultimately prayers FOR the dead become a part of everyday life.
    - i. “Good Death” concept
    - ii. Ars moriendi (The Art of Dying)
    - iii. Office of the Dead in the Book of Hours
    - iv. Charnel Houses and Ossuaries common

## *Bibliography*

Aries, Philippe. 1985. *Images of Man and Death*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

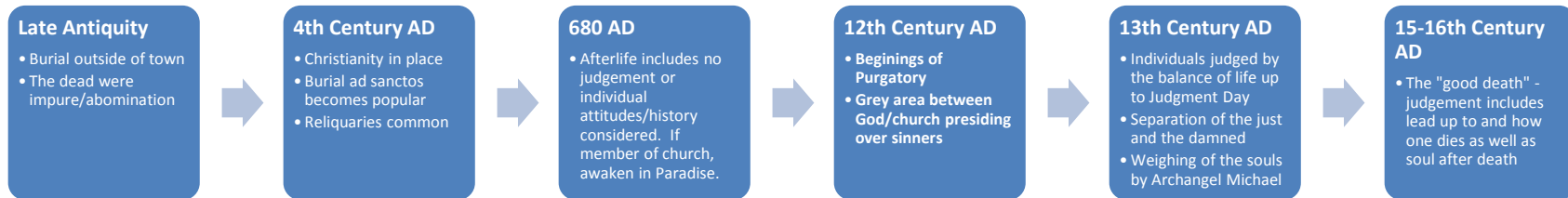
----- 1981. *The Hour of Our Death*. Translated by Helen Weaver. New York: Random House.

----- 1975. *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Translated by Patricia Ranum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Binski, Paul. 1996. *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*. Ithica: Cornell University Press.

Daniell, Christopher. 1997. *Death and Burial in Medieval England*. New York: Routledge.

## Overall timeline:



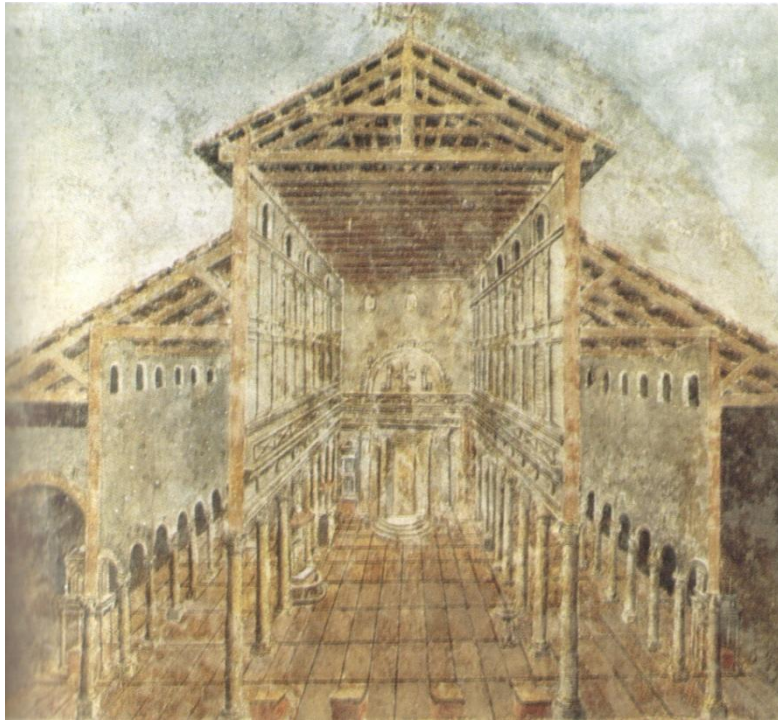
(1) Appian Way, Rome



(2) Hand Reliquary

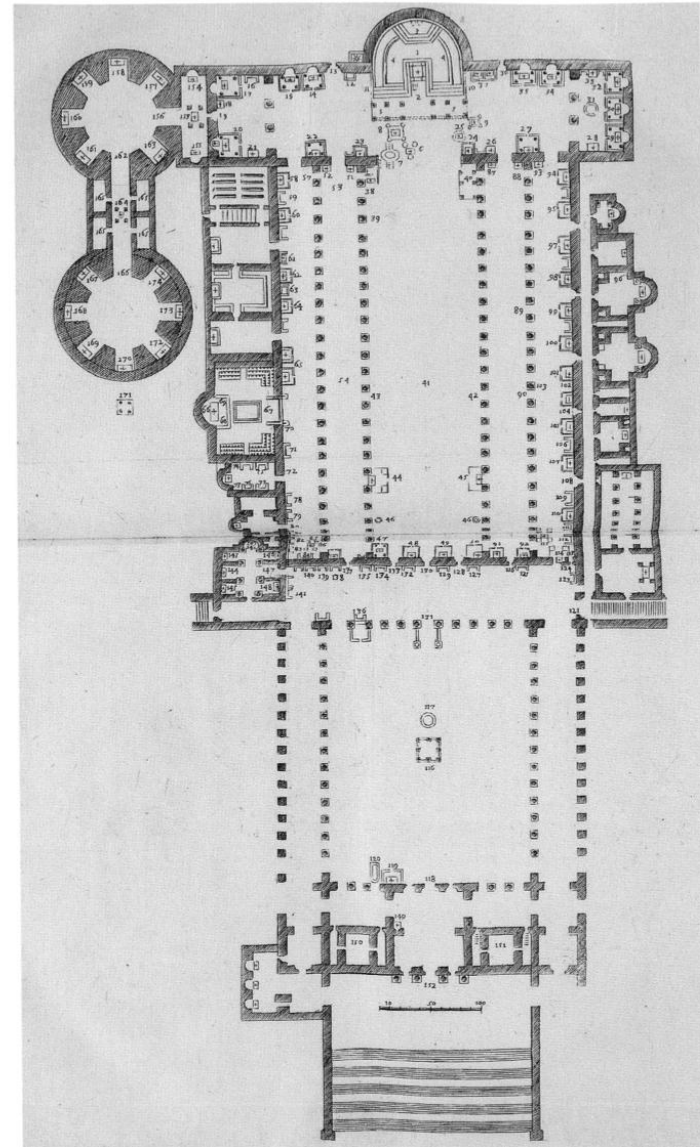


(3) Weighing of the Souls by Archangel Michael



(4) Fresco showing cutaway view of Constantine's Old St. Peter's Basilica as it looked in the 4th century

VESTIGIVM VETERIS DIVI PETRI IN VATICANO BASILICÆ. A COSTANTINO MAGNO A FVNDAMENTIS CONSTRVCTA NEC NON SACELLORVM ATQVE ORATORIORVM SACRARVMQVE ÆDICVLARVM ILLI ADIVNCTARVM



(5) A map, circa 1590, by Tiberio Alfarano of the interior of Old Saint Peter's, noting the locations of the original chapels and tombs





(6) Pride of the spirit is one of the five temptations of the dying man, according to *Ars moriendi*. Here, Demons tempt the dying man with crowns (a medieval allegory to earthly pride) under the disapproving gaze of Mary, Christ and God. Woodblock seven (4a) of eleven, Netherlands, circa 1460.



(7) Book of Hours, Use of Clermont France, Central (probably diocese of Clermont); last quarter of the 15th century



(8) Sedlec Ossuary, located beneath the Cemetery Church of All Saints in Sedlec, a suburb of Kutná Hora in the Czech Republic.



(9) Cimetière des Innocents (Les Innocents)

## *Image Sources*

- (1) Aries, Philippe. *Images of Man and Death*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1985, 2.
- (2) <http://www.artcyclopedia.org/art/guariento-di-arpo-archangel.jpg>
- (3) <http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/232/index.html>
- (4) [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Affresco\\_dell%27aspetto\\_antico\\_della\\_basilica\\_costantiniana\\_di\\_san\\_pietro\\_nel\\_IV\\_secolo.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Affresco_dell%27aspetto_antico_della_basilica_costantiniana_di_san_pietro_nel_IV_secolo.jpg)
- (5) [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/cf/Alfarano\\_map.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/cf/Alfarano_map.jpg)
- (6) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ars.moriendi.pride.a.jpg>
- (7) <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=4726>
- (8) Private collection, Charles Grab
- (9) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Saints\\_Innocents\\_1550\\_Hoffbauer.jpg#filelinks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Saints_Innocents_1550_Hoffbauer.jpg#filelinks)