

Post Mortem – an Afterword

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When Epicurus (Greek: Epikouros, 341–270 B.C.E.) told us centuries ago that we need not be concerned with death, because when we are there, death is not there, and when death comes, we will not be there any more,¹ he gave us to understand that life should be enjoyed even if we know it will be short. Life and death are complimentary, but one should not exclude the other. The idea of life overcoming death is essential for the understanding of Christianity. At the same time, the conviction that *mors omnia vincit* has been an important guideline for humankind in understanding that death also means that there is an end and that life must be lived on that premise.

Attitudes towards death in different cultures and at different times are still fascinating subjects, which have been the object of vigorous and often very interesting research for decades. The history of death is the history of human attitudes towards death as it is reflected in art, literature, religion, and law. For former generations death was always present and coping with death was a part of everyday life. In many ways, it is like this today in that poverty, terror, and catastrophes on the media confront us with death. Looking at exotic death rituals can be part of a tourist trip abroad and churchyards still attract visitors. However, looking directly at death in this way does not convey the idea of vanity and that nothing will last forever in the same way as the traditional image of the man with the scythe. Death in the modern world has changed its meaning. It is no longer seen as the logical fulfilment of life but more as an absurd interruption which can even bereave life of its meaning, instead of giving it meaning. Studying death in a historical perspective, including the understanding of the aesthetics of death and the confrontation with the idea of dying as an art, mastered by former generations, may contribute to a dialogue on death which accepts it as something natural. The *mors omnia vincit* in this way becomes a saying based on a deep understanding of the human condition.

1 “Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.” Letter to Menoeceus, published in Hicks (ed.) 1910, 169.



Picture 1. Albrecht Dürer's (1471–1528) *Knight, Death and the Devil* belongs to the *memento mori* genre. Death awaits the high and mighty as well as the poor and whether they will belong to the Devil or not depends on the actions of the individual rather than his or her position in life.

The history of death is the story of how mankind has endeavoured to cope with the reality of death; not hiding it but looking at it as something natural which you actually have to master. Confronting death is the last exam and, if you master it, it may well serve as a model for others. The death of Socrates (ca. 470–399 B.C.E.) as described by Plato (ca. 428–347 B.C.E.) in the dialogue *Crito* or the way in which other individuals whose last moments have been recorded as exemplary may serve us as examples of how to die. The history of death and attitudes towards death throughout history are thus matters which allows us to understand not only cultures of the past but also our own culture better. To pursue research on this theme is to contribute to social history but also to a better understanding of changing conditions and anxieties in the world today.

The present author published a book on the history of death in 1992 under the title *The Triumph of Death*.² As is well known, it was Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304–1374) who coined this expression in the fourteenth century under the depredations of the plague. My inspiration, apart from possible personal motives, came from the inspiring French research into the history of attitudes and behaviour. Names like Ariès,³ Vovelle⁴ and Chaunu⁵ had taken new paths in research into the Middle Ages and modern times in the 1970s and 1980s by stressing exactly how much could be learned from studying attitudes towards death. At the same time, a historian like Richard Cobb by skilfully using official documents from the coronial inquests in his book on death in Paris from 1978 could tell new stories of people who had chosen to commit suicide at the time of the French Revolution by throwing themselves into the Seine.⁶ In 1987, Richard J. Evans took us to death in Hamburg explaining how the cholera epidemic in the nineteenth century still caused havoc in a civilized society.⁷

I was deeply impressed by such books and my intention was to investigate whether ideas from this research might be helpful in understanding attitudes towards death in a Nordic country like Denmark. In fact, one of the oldest Danish written laws, the law of Scania, begins with: “If a man has a wife, and she dies before the child is born.”⁸ The reality of death is clearly reflected in the old medieval laws. The first time death was mentioned in a Danish text it was in order to lay down its legal consequences. Medieval laws often tell small concentrated stories, as does the Church Law of Scania from around 1171 in which we read about “a man who lies on his deathbed and gives his property to God.”⁹ This new idea of giving something for the soul was an important novelty in medieval society, which caused many conflicts between legal heirs and the Church.

Nordic laws are also an important source for Anne Irene Riisøy in her study on dead outlaws in medieval Norway in this book and their exclusion from a Christian burial. She takes as her starting point that certain crimes were considered morally reprehensible and that denial of burial was a concomitant of the general repudiation of such crimes, which were mostly those committed in a cowardly and concealed way and without notifying anyone after the deed. Riisøy thus uses the source material to combine reflections on death and death rituals with legal history.

2 Tamm 1992.

3 Ariès 1977.

4 Vovelle 1983.

5 Chaunu 1978.

6 Cobb 1978.

7 Evans 1987.

8 Author's translation from the original text of the Law of Scania (ca. 1200), *Danmarks gamle landskapslove med Kirkelovene*. Vol. 1:1, Ch. 1, 1.

9 *Danmarks gamle landskapslove med Kirkelovene*. Vol. 1:2, Ch. 5, 834.

Norwegian sources are much richer than the Danish medieval laws in terms of Church law and rules on burials, and thus give a much more detailed picture of how various views of death intersect in old Norse society, including when people who were excommunicated were denied burial. In the present volume, Beata Wojciechowska also stresses the importance of the Christian Church in the Middle Ages for its attitudes associated with death and funerals, and she also refers to the research of figures like Ariès and Vovelle. She deals with the clash between Christianity and traditional pagan concepts of the afterlife and how rituals for the remembrance of the dead were actually fused into Christian belief and considered as efficacious.

The idea of the afterlife as depicted by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in his *Divine Comedy* from shortly after 1300 makes a tremendous impression, quite different from the places for repentant souls described by Wojciechowska. The idea of Purgatory, which is such an important feature of Dante's geography of the world beyond death is a curious and interesting phenomenon studied by Jacques Le Goff.¹⁰ As mentioned, death is an important theme for Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) in his *Triunfi* of about 1340. His contemporary Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) wrote his famous collections of short stories, *Il Decamerone*, about a group of young people trying to flee death outside Florence.¹¹ How difficult it could be to avoid fate if you were actually destined to die is depicted in tremendous pieces of art in the Campo Santo of Pisa and other places. These pictures show death as an invincible force that may snatch us away at any moment. The other side of death, parental grief, is treated in this volume by Viktor Aldrin who, in opposition to Philippe Ariès, stressed that the emotions of mourning, especially for children, actually did exist in the Middle Ages and were not only accepted or visible later as proposed by Ariès. Aldrin's source material is taken from accounts of the saints and their miracles, in which grief is mentioned as one of the phases of bereavement. He also shows how reactions to the sudden death of a child were especially strong.

Protestantism did not necessarily lead to a radically different attitude. Money could still be bequeathed to ecclesiastical institutions or the poor. In the sixteenth century, however, the funeral monuments for royal personages or noblemen also become more imposing until ordinances on luxury in the seventeenth century called for a certain modesty. Eivor Andersen Oftestad has analysed a late medieval Danish poem, *De Vita Hominis*, with the aim of showing continuity and change in the economic and spiritual investment in the afterlife in the time before and after the Lutheran Reformation. She shows how after the Reformation, this late medieval work was formed by A.S. Vedel (1542–1616) to introduce a new way of seeing the afterlife. Instead of depending on intercessions from others, faith showed during one's life became central. How the Reformation actually meant a change is also illustrated in the article by Håkon Haugland on the guilds and death and funerals

¹⁰ Le Goff 1981.

¹¹ Boccaccio 1972 (1348–1353), trans. McWilliam.

in Norway in the late Middle Ages and early modern times. Such guilds in the late Middle Ages played an important role, one of which was helping their deceased members. Assistance with funerals continued after the Reformation. However, the Reformation changed the framework within which the guilds worked, and although they continued to help in situations of death they lost their importance, albeit gradually.

What perhaps impressed me the most when writing my small book in the 1990s was the study of the sermons preached by leading Danish clerics from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when distinguished members of noble families had passed away. An extended description of the last days and hours of the deceased was part of composing such a funeral sermon. People with whom conversations were held, the quotations from the Bible which were referred to by the dying, last words and the dignified attitude towards death were recorded and pointed out. The art of dying, *ars moriendi*, thus became a popular theme and death and the way to face it became a genre of its own. Reading such descriptions may be comforting even today. The Swedish King Charles X Gustav (1622–1660, r. 1654–1660) is another example. As a “soldier and a scholar”, he could quote extensively from the *Aeneid* (ca. 30 B.C.E.) of Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.) just the day before he died in 1660 from an attack of fever, depicting how Aeneas visited the realm of death and was told that to come back from there was the most difficult art: “*Hoc opus, hic labor est.*” It was the King’s doctor who related the last days of the King and how two days before he died he had said, confronted with the possibility that he might not survive but die: “*Ad utrum que paratus sum.*”¹²



Picture 2. The German David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl (1629–1698) who became the famous Swedish court painter, immortalised King Charles (Karl) XI of Sweden (1655–1697) on his *lit de parade* in 1697. King Charles XI, only child of King Charles X Gustav, died a lingering death of cancer at the age of 41 after a reign of 35 years.

12 Önnersfors 1987.

From the top of society we virtually descend into the underworld when it comes to Iris Ridder's article in this volume on the oracle games used by the miners in Falun in Central Sweden at the beginning of the seventeenth century. She describes how miners used dice to decide where to work in the mine and thus how playing a game was a means not only of making decisions but also a strategy to avoid chance and randomness by casting lots and let the decision be taken by Him who in the end was considered the master of fate.

The articles in this volume are concentrated on themes from the Middle Ages and early modern period. The story of death however goes on. Death as a penalty and the discussion of the effectiveness of the death penalty that started in the eighteenth century when the Italian Cesare Beccaria (1738–1794) challenged the death penalty in his *Dei Delitti e delle pene* of 1764 is another aspect of attitudes towards death.¹³ The culture of churchyards and the modern idea of having burials not in the church or in city graveyards but outside also show new attitudes since the end of the eighteenth century. The horror of suspended animation leading to being buried alive also stems from this time. In the nineteenth century, we encounter the attitude that death shall be denied and that the patient should be maintained in the belief that they will recover as long as possible. A famous short masterpiece by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), *The death of Ivan Ilyich* from 1886, tells the story of a Russian judge who realizes during an extended struggle with death and the idea that he is actually dying in the end that life is over, that he is “done for, there was no way back, the end was here, the absolute end [...]”¹⁴ The story in many ways reflects an attitude completely the reverse of the one we met when kings and noblemen died their exemplary deaths in the seventeenth century.

An important contemporary discussion is voluntary euthanasia when further medical treatment seems both painful and useless. In the medical language, death is still “*mors*” and a clinical concept. As this rich collection of articles shows, historians have other ways at looking at a phenomenon which – even if Epicurus tried to convince us of the contrary – is always there. In the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) wrote that “all philosophical reflection had to do with the preparation for death,” even stressing how death was the final goal of our life.¹⁵ The complementarity between the two notions is obvious when we look at customs, attitudes and laws concerning death. The articles in this volume show that when we as historians take up death and attitudes towards it as an investigation of “some aspects of the medieval and early modern mentalities related to death and what expressions the cultures of death took in Europe,” we visit a rich field with an abundance of fascinating concepts which add substantially to our knowledge not only of death but also of life in the past.

13 Beccaria 1984 (1764).

14 Tolstoy 2006 (1886).

15 “[L]et us learn bravely to stand our ground, and fight him. And to begin to deprive him of the greatest advantage he has over us, let us take a way quite contrary to the common course. Let us disarm him of his novelty and strangeness, let us converse and be familiar with him, and have nothing so frequent in our thoughts as death,” quoted from Montaigne's essay “That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die,” in Hazlitt (ed.) 1877 (1580), Book I, Chapter XIX.

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