

Jyrki Nissi

Death in the Middle Ages

How to Have a Good Death in Europe
at the Time of the Black Death



Cover design: Emmi Kyytsönen



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The burning of wax candles, the scent of incense, a priest speaking in Latin and sprinkling holy water... For medieval people, the approach to the moment of death comprised the first steps on the journey to the hereafter. The people who had gathered around the deathbed knew how to look out for numerous signs of the moment of passing, waiting for the three final gasps. With vicious waves of the plague going around, death and a person's final moments played a significant religious and cultural role in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe.

Death in the Middle Ages provides fascinating insight into how people and communities strove for what they thought of as a “good death”. Although death was solidly woven into people's everyday lives, it involved many special rituals and strong emotions. This book examines the special characteristics of death in the Middle Ages, from ways of preparing for it to the actual moment of death, as well as burial rituals. The stories of miraculous resurrections that were typical of the time reveal a lot about people's death-related customs and ideas. Such texts can be found all over Europe, from Italian metropolises to the Swedish countryside.

This work demonstrates how significant thinking about the afterworld was back then, compared to today's live-in-the-moment philosophy. And yet, there are also similarities; our thoughts on mortality link humanity on an emotional plane across the centuries.

About the author

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* * * In trying to fathom the medieval understanding of death, present-day people are often limited in their comprehension, as our concept of life and death is binary. In our minds, a person is alive until they die. For us, there is nothing living in the deceased and nothing dead in a living person. In the Middle Ages, the boundary between life and death was less defined. In the case of Jacobus, related above, Herculanus and Alexandra described the arrival of death through the final breaths of the dying, which is reminiscent of our conception of death. For us, the moment of death is a specific instant in time, after which the person is no longer alive. The medieval idea of final breaths can be linked to the broader process described in *quasi mortuus* cases, however. Death, or the departure of the soul from the body, was seen as a longer chain of events that could last several hours or even days.

In the Middle Ages, in other words, dying was a gradual transition from living to dead. The final breaths were the end point of this process, after which the soul went to Purgatory for cleansing, and the next stage began there. The idea of *quasi mortuus* is best understood as a process, by which a person had begun journeying towards death but had not yet reached the destination. For medieval people, death was literally a *process of passing*.

In the hagiography of Saint James of the Marches (Jacobus de Marchia), this gradual aspect of passing becomes clear in a few cases. The accounts of his miracles describe persons who had not “completely finished dying”, the Italian expression being *formire de morire*. An alternative translation could be “finishing carrying out death”; the verb *formire* could be translated as finishing, achieving or completing. Dying is, therefore, presented as an active operation that can be completed. For example, a man called Notar Silvestro had suffered for more than six weeks from a serious illness in a place called Cava (today’s Cava de’ Tirreni) in 1478. The doctors and other persons present had lost all hope of his recovery and he was considered “as dead” (*como a morto*) for more than two hours. His parents were summoned to take care of his burial. According to the account, Silvestro’s godfather Minico also arrived at the scene and saw that he was “not yet done dying”.

Another account of miracles by St. James tells of a man with such a serious illness that his funeral was being prepared. While many claimed that he was

already dead, a certain Janpero could see that he had not “completely finished dying” and prayed for heavenly assistance, making a vow (*votum*) to St. James. In a third case, the parents of six-month-old Andreana made a *votum* to Saint James before their baby had “entirely finished dying”. According to the account of the miracle, Andreana’s mother had already bought the funeral shroud, proving that they had accepted the death of their child. Similarly, a man named Vincencio saw that there was a little life left in his two-month-old baby, who “had not yet finished dying”. In these cases, life and death were not mutually exclusive states of being, just as they weren’t in macabre art. Tiny signs of life were proof that passing was not yet complete. The aforementioned cases of *formire de morire* were not the only proof of gradual passing among the miracles of St. James of the Marches. There is a further case that uses the term *finire de morire*, which also means finishing or completing death. According to the account, Petro Jacobo de Jennaro’s one-year-old son Ferrante was critically ill and had been given up on by all the medics. The boy did not breathe and was “as dead” (*como morto*). Apparently there were several men and women there who all said that he had “completed his passing”.

In St. James’s hagiography, the same phenomenon is described with the expressions *formire de morire* and *finire de morire*. This demonstrates that it is not a coincidental mention by the Franciscan monk who put together the account, or a case of a misunderstood metaphor by researchers. The terminology indicates a conscious effort to describe dying as a process with an end point. And not only an that, of course; it must also have a starting point. In Sweden, the canonization process of Nils Hermansson describes a 15-year-old girl who “started to die”. The possibility of a person simultaneously having characteristics of both life and death is thus also present in Swedish resurrection miracles. In the canonization process of St. Bridget of Sweden, a Swedish woman is described as dead in the rest of her body, while still having the spirit of life (*vitalis spiritus*) in her chest. In another case, a Bridgettine nun is described as having died on the right-hand side of her body, which was a different colour from the left. * * *

(Chapter 3, pp. 132–135)

* * * Fear is a natural emotion at a time of death. It is my view that in the late Middle Ages, people were primarily afraid of what they thought of as a “bad” death. Many prayers for the souls of people who were knocking on the gates of death wished for them to avoid a bad death. On the other hand, resurrection miracles also include cases where resurrection was hoped for even after a dying person had received their last rites, so death could be unwelcome even when it was guaranteed to be a “good death”. Eamon Duffy, who has researched the religious history of late-medieval and early modern Britain, has said that testaments from that time do not demonstrate a morbid or obsessive attitude towards death, but rather a “vigorous attachment” to life. The same applies to resurrection miracles, where people strove to lengthen their lives or those of their near and dear ones.

Weeping and other displays of emotion at a person’s deathbed were born out of devotion but also out of the sorrow caused by losing a dear person – just like today. Although the theological atmosphere of the late Middle Ages emphasised the acceptance and approval of death, ordinary Christians did not always see it thus. What mattered to them, just as to people from other eras, was the time spent with their near and dear ones. In resurrection miracles, expressing the sorrow and anxiety caused by loss of life was socially acceptable, and it was also significant from the perspective of proving the presence of a miracle in that it confirmed the misery of the situation, to

which only the help of a saint could bring relief.

Although the official direction of the Church was to avoid excessive attachment to worldly things and to accept one’s fate, there was also a lot of medical discussion in medieval times as to how people could prolong their lives. In the philosophical and theoretical discourse of the time, longevity was sought through alchemy, as gold in particular was believed to have life-prolonging effects. Naturally, extracts of precious metals were out of the question for ordinary medieval citizens, and, in any case, these were not believed to help at critical fatal moments; instead, people sought emergency solutions from measures that were available and had been tried and tested in the community. Praying to saints offered an acceptable, religious outlet for expressing and processing sorrow at one’s own or a relative’s death. By weeping and praying for the help of a saint, people could channel their anxiety about death into religious activity. From the point of view of canonization commissions, there was nothing suspicious about that, despite the fact that theologians conversely encouraged people to accept death. Jesus had been depicted as doing the same by the grave of Lazarus, so people were only following a Biblical model, after all. * * *

(Chapter 5, pp. 273–274)

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