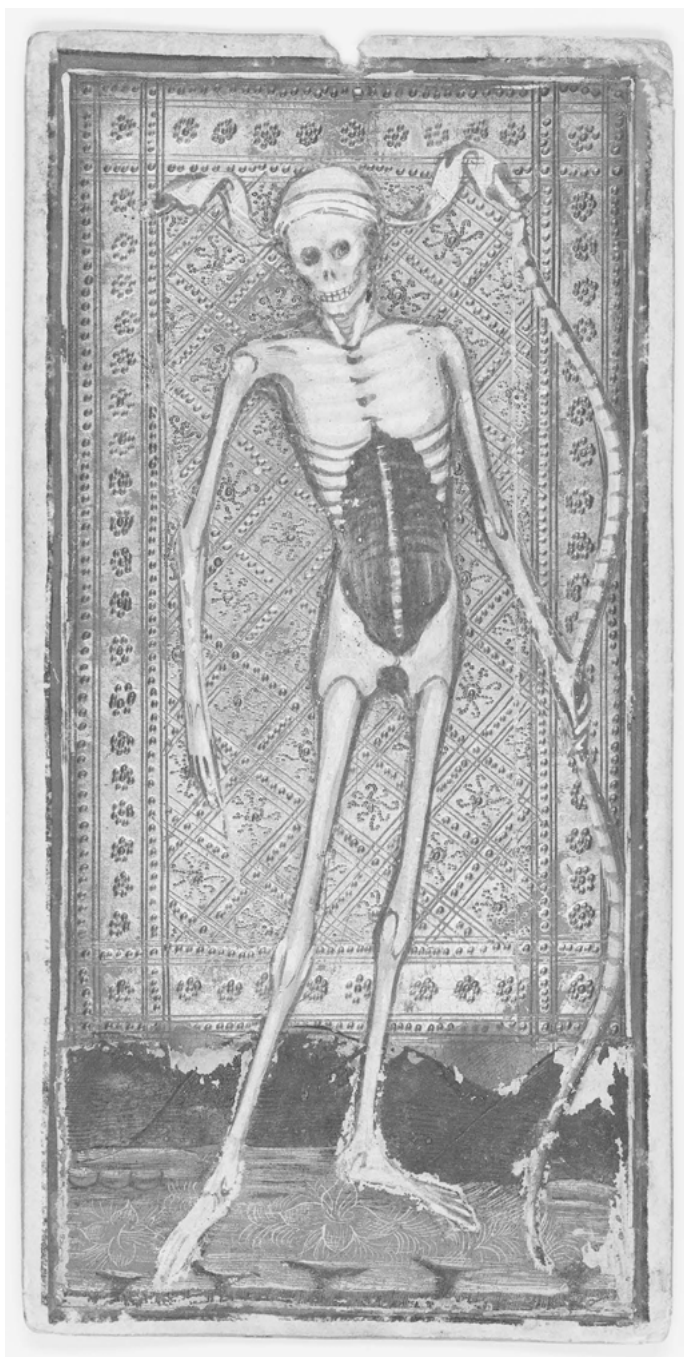


 AFTERLIVES



FRONTISPIECE. Death Tarocco Card. Playing card from the Visconti-Sforza Tarot deck, ca. 1451. Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.630, card 12.

AFTERLIVES



THE RETURN OF THE DEAD
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

NANCY MANDEVILLE CACIOLA

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For my friends and family

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I surely would not be the woman I am today without the love and support of my friends and family. With sincerity and gratitude, I dedicate this book collectively to them.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AASS** *Acta Sanctorum, quotquot toto orbe coluntur, vel a Catholicis Scriptoribus celebrantur*, ed. Société des Bollandistes, 68 vols. (Brussels, 1863–87)
- CH** Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. J. Strange, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1851)
- CPM** Aurelius Augustinus, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, in *PL*, 40, cols. 591–610
- GrGr** Gregory the Great, *Dialogorum libri quatuor*, in *PL*, 77, cols. 149–428
- GT** Gervaise of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns (Oxford, 2002)
- HRA** William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, ed. Richard Howlett, Rolls Series (London, 1884–85)
- JF** *Le registre d’Inquisition de Jacques Fournier, Évêque de Pamiers (1318–1325): Manuscrit Vat. Latin no. 4030 de la Bibliothèque Vaticane*, ed. Jean Duvernoy, 3 vols. (Toulouse, 1965)
- LA** Tertullian, *Liber de anima*, in *PL*, 2, cols. 641–752
- MJG** *Miraculi S. Joannis Gualberti Abbatis*, in *AASS*, 30 (July 12): 363–433
- MTC** Curial report on the miracles of Thomas of Cantilupe, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 5373A, edited in appendix 1 to André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1997), 540–54
- OV** Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, *The “Ecclesiastical History” of Orderic Vitalis*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80)
- PCNT** *Il processo per la canonizzazione di S. Nicola da Tolentino*, ed. Nicola Occhioni (Rome, 1983)
- PCTC** *Processus Canonizationis S. Thomae Herefordensis*, Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. Lat. 4015
- PL** *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1841–66)

- TM Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon: Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg*, ed. Robert Holzman, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum, n.s. 9 (Munich, 1980)
- WA William of Auvergne, *De universo*, in *Opera omnia*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1963), 1:593–1074
- WM Walter Map, *De nugis curialium*, ed. T. Wright (New York, 1968)

 AFTERLIVES

Introduction

This book charts a history of the unknown: of pure, unslaked curiosity. It seems only appropriate, then, to begin with questions. These are just a few of the many things that medieval people wondered about death and afterlife:

- A priest asks the spirit of a dead man, “What is it like to die?”
- A novice asks a monk, “What makes a death ‘good’ or ‘bad’?”
- A crowd gathers to interview a specter haunting an inn, “Where do you live? . . . Are you alone or in a community? . . . How do you spend your time?”
- An abbot asks a woman visionary, “What does the soul look like?”
- A storyteller wonders, “*Why* do we die?”
- A cleric examining the case of a boy’s death muses, “Since the body was intact, how was the determination of death made?”
- A young girl asks the ghost of her favorite cousin, “Where is Gehenna? . . . Do the dead reach their place in the afterlife right away? . . . Do material things feel heavy to you?”¹

1. GT, 771; CH, 2:266; Augustus Potthast, ed., *Liber de rebus memorabilioribus sive Chronicon de Henrici de Hervordia* (Göttingen, 1859), 279; CH, 1:39; Albrecht Wagner, ed., *Visio Tnugdali lateinisch und altddeutsch* (Erlangen, 1882), 8; *MTC*, 540–54; GT, 764–68.

Death remained strange: it lay beyond the limits of the knowable, a subject of obsessive speculation and uncertainty. The questions above indicate the scope of nonconvergence between available systems of knowledge and human curiosity. Despite the Christian church's confident claims to otherworldly answers, postmortem questions persisted. The popularity of the medieval motif of the postmortem pact, in which friends swear an agreement that the first to die should return and give a full account to the survivor, testifies to the open-ended curiosity of the living for an understanding of the world beyond the grave.²

The memory of the dead lingered, hovering at the social periphery yet central to the symbolic systems of medieval culture.³ Indeed, perhaps more than any other cultural arena, attitudes toward death and the dead reveal how societies think distinctively about what it means to be human. Death is the ultimate translation of self: seemingly in an instant, it transmutes a *person* into a *thing*. Yet at the same time that mortality confronts us with a radical materialist change in the body, so, too, does it involve purely idealist constructions of a perduring self in an afterlife. The very secrecy of the grave—the word “cryptic” derives, after all, from “crypt”⁴—both engenders fascination and fosters imaginative constructions of a world beyond. Death thus opens up a vivid, yet wholly elusive and imaginary, space: it is the heterotopic site par excellence. The dead themselves, as imaginary persons, collectively serve as a fulcrum for broader ideas about how the individual relates to the macrocosms of society and a well-ordered universe. However, this imaginative aspect of the dead was built upon real personalities and real cadavers: thus the history of the dead is necessarily both idealist and materialist. The dead were freighted with significance for the ultimate questions: mortality, eternity, and bloodline; fertility and decay; where one came from and where one ultimately must go.

Patrick Geary has defined the dead in the Middle Ages as an “age class.”⁵ The phrase is suggestive of a final phase of existence as an ancestor, one who watches over the younger, still-living members of the family or community. The term neatly encapsulates the social reciprocity and continued influence

2. Wolfgang Behringer, *The Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoecklin and the Phantoms of the Night*, trans. E. Middelfort (Charlottesville, VA, 1998); Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, “Philippe de Mézières's Ghostly Encounters: From the *Vie de Saint Pierre de Thomas* (1366) to the *L'Epistre lamentable* (1397),” *Romania* 127 (2009): 168–89.

3. Barbara A. Babcock, “‘Liberty's a Whore’: Inversions, Marginalia, and a Picaresque Narrative,” in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. Barbara A. Babcock (Ithaca, NY, 1978), 95–116.

4. Benjamin Saltzmann, *The Limits of Secrecy: A Cultural and Literary History of Concealment in Early Medieval England* (manuscript in preparation), 81–82. I would like to thank Dr. Saltzmann for sharing his work in progress with me.

5. Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 36.

that the dead were believed to exert over the living throughout medieval society. Preoccupation with the continuing vitality and power of the dead was a characteristic feature of medieval society. We encounter the dead at every turn. After the millennium, in all corners of Europe we find strange accounts of deceased people who seem far from fully extinct. Corporeal revenants (the embodied dead) arose from their tombs to attack their former neighbors,⁶ or to celebrate mass in abandoned churches;⁷ other undead folk danced joyously in cemeteries and fields.⁸ Ghosts arrived from the other-world to spirit-possess their descendants;⁹ Hellequin's dead army marched across moonlit forests and winter skies,¹⁰ and whole royal courts of the dead were discovered (after)living inside hollow mountains.¹¹ The living, for their part, divided bodies for plural burial,¹² held festivals, wakes, and other rites in honor of the recently deceased,¹³ and staged dances of death in graveyards.¹⁴ Some men claimed they snatched their dead wives back from fairy

6. Nancy Caciola, "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture," *Past & Present*, no. 152 (1996): 3–45; Jacqueline Simpson, "Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England," *Folklore* 114, no. 3 (2003): 389–402; John Blair, "The Dangerous Dead in Early Medieval England," in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen Baxter et al. (Burlington, VT, 2009), 539–59.

7. Nancy Mandeville Caciola, "Revenants, Resurrection, and Burnt Sacrifice," *Preternature* 3, no. 2 (2014): 311–38.

8. Elizabeth Barber, *The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology and the Origins of European Dance* (New York, 2013). I would like to thank Jamie M. Marvin for bringing this book to my attention.

9. Nancy Caciola, "Spirits Seeking Bodies: Death, Possession, and Communal Memory in the Middle Ages," in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge, 2000), 66–86.

10. Alan Bernstein, "The Ghostly Troop and the Battle over Death: William of Auvergne (d.1249) Connects Christian, Old Norse, and Irish Views," in *Rethinking Ghosts in World Religions*, ed. Mu-Chou Poo (Leiden, 2009), 115–61.

11. Arturo Graf, "Artù nell'Etna," in *Miti, leggende e superstizioni del Medio Evo*, 2 vols. (Bologna, 1965), 2:301–35; Robert E. Lerner, "Frederick II, Alive, Aloft, and Allayed," in *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, ed. Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst, and Andries Welkenhuysen (Leuven, 1988), 359–84.

12. Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse," *Viator* 12 (1981): 221–70; Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Authority, the Family, and the Dead in Late Medieval France," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 803–32; Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, "The Corpse in the Middle Ages: The Problem of the Division of the Body," in *The Medieval World*, ed. Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson (London, 2001), 27–41.

13. Nikolaus Kyll, *Töd, Grab, Begräbnisplatz, Totenfeier: Zur Geschichte ihres Brauchtums im Trierer Lande und in Luxemburg unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Visitationshandbuchs des Regino von Prüm (†915)* (Bonn, 1972).

14. Louis Gougaud, "La danse dans les églises," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 15 (1914): 5–22, 229–43; see also consideration in Kyll, *Töd, Grab, Begräbnisplatz, Totenfeier*, 95–101; Florence Whyte, *The Dance of Death in Spain and Catalonia* (Baltimore, 1931); Elina Gertsman, "Pleyinge and Peyntinge: Performing the Dance of Death," *Studies in Iconography* 27 (2006): 1–43; Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* (Turnhout, 2010), 51–100.

rings and even had children with them afterwards: the dead giving life.¹⁵ Of course, everywhere relic cults proliferated for the “very special dead” of recent memory.¹⁶ Concern to assist the dead escalated steeply in monastic and clerical circles, as evidenced by the innovation of necrologies,¹⁷ the increasing formalization of purgatory,¹⁸ and the multiplication of assistance techniques for one’s ancestors—the “Church Suffering”—held there.¹⁹ Both medical specialists and regular folk struggled precisely to determine the exact physiological differences between vitality and mortality and to diagnose deaths when someone was unresponsive.²⁰ Medical writers recommended consumption of powdered human mummy or the blood of executed criminals as health tonics and guarantors of vitality.²¹ Finally, in the latter part of the period, macabre iconographies such as the “Three Living and Three

15. Claude Lecouteux, *Fées, sorcières et loups-garous au Moyen Âge: Histoire du double* (Paris, 1992); Éva Pócs, *Fairies and Witches at the Boundary of South-Eastern and Central Europe*, Folklore Fellows Communications 243 (Helsinki, 1989); Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (Budapest, 1999); Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things* (New York, 2000); Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton, 2005); Alaric Hall, “Getting Shot of Elves: Healing, Witchcraft, and Fairies in the Scottish Witchcraft Trials,” *Folklore* 116, no. 1 (2005): 19–36; Laurent Guyénot, *La mort féérique: Anthropologie du merveilleux, XIIe–XVe siècle* (Paris, 2011); Barber, *Dancing Goddesses*.

16. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981). The most recent study in this large field is Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ, 2013); see also the unsurpassed André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1997).

17. Dominique Iogna-Prat, “The Dead in the Celestial Bookkeeping of the Cluniac Monks around the Year 1000,” in *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, ed. Lester Little and Barbara Rosenwein (Oxford, 1998), 340–62.

18. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984); Aron Gurevich, “Popular and Scholarly Medieval Cultural Traditions: Notes in the Margin of Jacques Le Goff’s Book,” *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 71–90.

19. Michel Lauwers, *La Mémoire des ancêtres, le souci des morts: Morts, rites, et société au Moyen Âge (Diocèse de Liège, XIe–XIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1996).

20. Christian Krötzel, “‘Evidentissima signa mortis’: Zu Tod und Todesfeststellung im Mittelalterlichen Mirakelberichten,” in *Symbole des Alltags, Alltag der Symbole: Festschrift für Harry Kühnel zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Gertrud Blaschitz, Helmut Hundsichler, Gerhard Jaritz, and Elizabeth Vavra (Graz, 1992), 765–75.

21. Mabel Peacock, “Executed Criminals and Folk-Medicine,” *Folklore* 7, no. 3 (1896): 268–83; Wayland Hand, “Hangmen, the Gallows, and the Dead Man’s Hand in American Folk Medicine,” in *Magical Medicine: The Folkloric Component of Medicine in the Folk Belief, Custom, and Ritual of the Peoples of Europe and America* (Berkeley, 1980), 69–80; P. Kenneth Himmelman, “The Medicinal Body: An Analysis of Medicinal Cannibalism in Europe, 1300–1700,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (1997): 183–203; Charles Zika, “Cannibalism and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Reading the Visual Images,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 44 (1997): 77–105; Michael Camille, “The Corpse in the Garden: *Mumia* in Medieval Herbal Illustrations,” in *Il Cadavere / The Corpse*, *Micrologus* 7 (Turnhout, 1999), 297–318; Richard Sugg, *Mummies, Cannibals, and Vampires: The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians* (London, 2011); Louise Noble, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York, 2011).

Dead,” “Triumph of Death,” and “Dance of Death” sprung up on church walls,²² even as churchmen composed guides to dying a perfect death—the *ars moriendi* (“art of dying well”).²³ Given this context, it should hardly be surprising that in the 1140s, Peter the Venerable declared appearances of the dead to be *the* characteristic miracle of his time.²⁴ The struggle to imagine death and afterlife is a recurrent theme in every region, social stratum, and area of cultural endeavor in the Middle Ages.

Some of these phenomena have received attention from scholars: the cult of the saints, in particular, is a flourishing area of inquiry. Yet the overall importance of the dead across medieval culture has been either overlooked or underemphasized by medievalists. When viewed together, however, these beliefs and practices suggest that medieval religion, as experienced on the ground, was dominated by the dead.²⁵ Indeed, the deceased interacted with

22. In addition to the works in n.14, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York, 1981); Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 1986); Helmut Rosenfeld, *Der Mittelalterliche Totentanz: Entstehung-Entwicklung-Bedeutung*, 2nd ed. (Cologne, 1968); Wolfgang Stammer, *Die Totentänze des Mittelalters* (Münich, 1922); James Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance* (Glasgow, 1950); Karl Künstle, *Die Legende der Drei Lebenden und der Drei Toten und der Totentanz nebst einem Exkurs über die Jakobslegende* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1908); Leonard Kurtz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature* (Geneva, 1975); Whyte, *Dance of Death in Spain and Catalonia*; Ann Tukey Harrison, ed., *The Danse Macabre of Wömen: MS. fr. 995 of the Bibliothèque nationale* (Kent, OH, 1994); Jean Batany, “Une image en négatif du fonctionnalisme social: Les Danses Macabré,” in *Dies Illa: Death in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Taylor (Liverpool, 1984), 15–28; Peter Walther, *Der Berliner Totentanz zu St. Marien* (Berlin, 1997).

23. Roger Chartier, “Les arts de mourir, 1450–1600,” *Annales E.S.C.* 31, no. 1 (1976): 51–75. Still valuable is the classic work of Alberto Tenenti, *Il senso della morte e l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento (Francia e Italia)* (Turin, 1957).

24. Petrus Venerabilis, *De miraculis*, in *PL*, 189, cols. 851–954.

25. Kyll, *Töd, Grab, Begräbnisplatz, Totenfeier*, the entire issue of *Annales E.S.C.* 31, no. 1 (1976); Pierre Chaunu, *La mort à Paris, XVIe, XVIIe, et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1978); Hughes Neveux, “Les lendemains de la mort dans les croyances occidentales (vers 1250–vers 1300),” *Annales E.S.C.* 34, no. 2 (1979): 245–63; Stephen Wilson, “Death and the Social Historians: Some Recent Books in French and English,” *Social History* 5 (1980): 435–51; Jacques Chiffolleau, *La comptabilité de l'au delà: Les hommes, la mort, et la région d'Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age (vers 1320 – vers 1480)* (Rome, 1980); Ariès, *Hour of Our Death*; Joachim Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (New York, 1981); Herman Braet and Werner Verbeke, eds., *Death in the Middle Ages* (Louvain, 1983); Taylor, *Dies Illa*; Ronald Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (New York, 1984); Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au moyen âge* (Paris, 1986); Frederic Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 1990); Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago, 1998); Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, NY, 1996); Lauwers, *La mémoire des ancêtres, le souci des morts*; Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England, 1066–1550* (London, 1997); *La mort et l'au-delà en France méridionale (XIIe–XVe siècle)*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 33 (Toulouse, 1998); Iogna-Prat, “The Dead in the Celestial Bookkeeping”; *Il Cadavere / The Corpse*; Gordon and Marshall, *The Place of the Dead*; Antonius C. G. M. Robben, ed., *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (Oxford, 2004); James S. Amelang, “Mourning Becomes Eclectic: Ritual Lament and the Problem of Continuity,” *Past & Present*,

the living with far greater frequency than did the divine. God the Father, and even the suffering Christ, were regarded from a greater distance than the knowable figures of the recently passed. Of course, even Christ himself was a deceased human being whose death iconography was central to the Christian religion. Medieval people encountered the dead at every turn, in contexts of veneration, supplication, and fear. In sum, the majority of “ordinary” people who believed that they had had direct experience of the supernatural realm did so in confrontation with other dead human beings.

Imagining Life after Death

The dead are poised in a peculiarly vivid symbolic position. On the one hand, they represent the ancestors or family line from which an individual springs; on the other, they ineluctably present the image of an unknown future, the thickly veiled, imagined realm of postmortem hopes and fears. They are at the intersection of fundamental ideas about identity and society, fertility and decay, temporal limitations and eternal transcendence. In sum, the dead present the perfect screen for human beings’ imaginations of themselves and their ultimate values. As such, the dead are quite intimately revelatory of the living.

This book begins from the premise that the social constructs that are built upon the fact of mortality are chief instruments of culture. Mortality and the ways in which afterlives are envisioned are central themes in the history of religion and the study of human society. Of course, the social significance of death is constructed with great variety and complexity within different cultural contexts.²⁶ For the Middle Ages, the most systematic articulation of a thanatology (“the science of death”) was that of formal Christian theology. In doctrinal terms, the body awaited resurrection even as it decayed,²⁷ while

no. 187 (2005): 3–31; Howard Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (Cambridge, 2006); Kenneth Rooney, *Mortality and Imagination: The Life of the Dead in Medieval English Literature* (Turnhout, 2011); Frederick Paxton, with the collaboration of Isabelle Cochelin, *The Death Ritual at Cluny in the Central Middle Ages / Le rituel de la mort à Cluny au moyen âge central* (Turnhout, 2013).

26. Cf. Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham (Glencoe, IL, 1960); Robert Hertz, “Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort,” *Année Sociologique* 10 (1907): 48–137; Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, eds., *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982); Jack Goody and Cesare Poppi, “Flowers and Bones: Approaches to the Dead in Anglo-American and Italian Cemeteries,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 1 (1994): 146–75; Robben, *Death, Mourning, and Burial*; John Clifford Holt, “Gone but Not Departed: The Dead among the Living in Contemporary Buddhist Sri Lanka,” in *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (Honolulu, 2007), 326–44; Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, “Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 1 (2015): 191–220.

27. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995).

the soul entered one realm of a multitiered afterlife, there to await reembodiment at the end of time.²⁸ In the meantime, here on earth the sites of Christian worship for the living were simultaneously spaces for the dead—in both interior sepulchers and exterior cemeteries. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 made the well-established custom of enclosing relics of the saints in Christian altars a formal requirement for every church. Thus the commemoration of the violent death of Jesus, via the Eucharist, took place above the corporeal remains of the holy dead; the altar of worship was literally a tomb. Yet as we shall see, though death and eternal afterlife were central concerns of the Christian religion, its scriptures offered very little guidance to the faithful on such matters. Though belief in an afterlife was the central dogma of the church, there were few guideposts about how this otherworldly afterlife realm was organized or what postmortem existence would be like. In consequence, patristic scholars differed widely on a few key questions. These included whether death was instantaneous or a long-term process, and whether there could be postmortem returns of the dead to this plane of existence. Between the second and the seventh centuries, the Latin church fathers suggested several different answers to these questions of death, afterlife, and postmortem return. The leadership of the church never formally endorsed one position over the others, however, so all were maintained as viable precedents within church tradition. In consequence the Middle Ages inherited a rather broad set of parameters for considering death and afterlife.

This openness to multiple points of view about how to imagine mortality and existence beyond the threshold of the grave continued as the church expanded from its Mediterranean roots into northern Europe. The intersection of Christian eschatology with various pagan afterlife imaginings, from the classical paganisms of the Mediterranean to the Germanic, Slavic, and Scandinavian paganisms indigenous to northern Europe, brought new cultural values about the dead into the Christian fold as the church expanded. For its part, the church was surprisingly open to these influences, absorbing new images of death and afterlife almost indiscriminately. For, quite simply, the chief teaching of the church was that life persisted for eternity, even after death, and that all the dead would someday resurrect to regain their bodies. Thus ghost and revenant stories were simply too useful to reject, for

28. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*; Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); Aron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1992), 50–89; Gurevich, “Popular and Scholarly Medieval Cultural Traditions”; Isabel Moreira, *Heaven’s Purge: Purgatory in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2010). For English translations of primary source documents on purgatory, see Eileen Gardiner, ed., *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante* (New York, 1989).

they offered direct, firsthand evidence for the existence of an afterlife beyond this one. Traditional pagan beliefs about the dead interacting with the living seemed like useful tools to Christian evangelizers and clergymen: they saw teaching opportunities in these local traditions about the returned dead. Furthermore, since the doctrinal precedents of the church were themselves multiple and diverse, these motifs, lightly reframed, could be incorporated into Christian texts and Christian preaching with relatively little friction. In many cases it was easy to find loose correlates within Christian tradition. For instance, ghost stories and tales of revenants could be utilized as vivid proofs of the afterlife. Through these means, the church maintained its core doctrinal coherence while permitting continual syncretistic transpositions with other cultural forms.²⁹ For their part, converts from paganism were enabled to maintain familiar aspects of their ancestral culture under shifting guises and with changed interpretations. Indeed, converts from paganism may also have discerned similarities between some of the church's teachings—particularly relic veneration or the doctrine of resurrection—and their own traditions.

There thus existed a broad space for the persistence, into the Christian culture of the high and late Middle Ages, of originally pagan traditions about the vigorous and active dead. These motifs settled side by side with scriptural references and the teachings of the church fathers. In sum, beliefs about the dead provided particularly active conduits for the circulation of ideas among different groups, and they often evolved in such a way as to function within more than one field of meaning simultaneously. Originally pagan stories about the returned dead were permitted to occupy the capacious middle ground of toleration without endorsement that long had characterized the church's attitude toward this realm of culture. In consequence, the *materia mortalia* of medieval culture was both abundant and often contradictory.

Changing Deathways: Religious Conversion and Afterlife

Intercultural contacts and struggles for hegemony quite often are played out as a series of inchoate negotiations over attitudes toward death, mourning, and burial. Indeed, funerary beliefs and rituals are among those most resistant to total reacculturation in contexts of cultural and religious transformation. Laurent Guyénot has concisely summed up this process in relation to medieval Europe:

Europe underwent a period of intense cultural brewing and sedimentation up through the end of the eleventh century: the result was a

29. Anita Leopold and Jeppe Jensen, eds., *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (New York, 2004).

civilization more pagano-Christian than Judeo-Christian. But the elements that filtered through from pre-Christian traditions into the lay religiosity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had nothing to do with pagan divinities. Principally, it was beliefs about the dead.³⁰

Indeed, medieval Christian authors themselves seem to have been aware of pagans' reluctance to transform their "deathways"³¹ when they considered converting to the new religion. Chroniclers and missionaries' hagiographers imagined that death and afterlife played a preeminent role in the minds of potential converts when they weighed the merits of the new rite. Thus when they wrote about conversions from paganism, they placed debates over mortality and the ancestors at the center of their discussions.

Bede's sparrow is a good example. The famous simile recounted in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* occurs as part of an account of a lively debate over conversion held in the Kingdom of Northumbria in 627. King Edwin and his court wondered whether to adopt a foreign religion that recently had been brought from the east and that had been making some inroads in Britain. One warrior advised:

It seems to me, O King, that the life of human beings present here on earth, when considered in light of how uncertain our time here is, is like this: It is as if, some time during winter you were relaxing at dinner with your war band and your ministers, with the fire lit at the center of the dining hall and warming it; while outside, winter tempests of rain and snow were raging away. And then as if a sparrow were to fly straight through the hall ever so swiftly, coming in through one window and just as quickly exiting by another. While it is inside the sparrow is untouched by the winter storm, but the length of this calm span is but a brief moment all the same. Soon it disappears from your sight and goes back: from winter, into winter. This life is a little bit like that: what came before, and what is to come after, we know nothing about. So, if this new teaching brings a more certain knowledge, then I think it seems worth following.³²

The image of a winter sparrow briefly warmed by its flight through a feasting hall is famed for its stark evocation of the ephemerality of mortal

30. Guyénot, *La mort féerique*, 18–19.

31. The word is borrowed from Erik Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492–1800* (Philadelphia, 2010).

32. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* 2:13, in *Bede: Historical Works*, ed. J. E. King, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 1:282–84.

life. And yet, the persuasive force of the simile lies elsewhere: it is the mystery of the sparrow's existence in the drear and cold outside. The unseen and unknowable flight of the sparrow before and after its passage through the firelit hall, in the dark and inhospitable atmosphere beyond the bounds of the familiar, directs attention to the human inability to know what lies beyond life's boundaries: "what came before, and what is to come after, we know nothing about." The grave was a cipher, the ultimate keeper of secrets. Anglo-Saxon kings like Edwin traced their genealogy back to Woden, but what could they expect for the future, after their deaths?³³ As each generation arose and passed away, what was the fate of those who joined the ancestors?

The simile is a pious reconstruction crafted by Bede long after the event. Yet at the same time, and as Bede well knew, it is plausible that the historical deliberations of Edwin's council or *witan* centered, broadly, upon questions of death, afterlife, and eternity.³⁴ Christianity was dedicated to the memory of a dead man resurrected from the grave; its most powerful claim was indeed that it provided "a more certain knowledge" that pierced beyond the veil of mortality. The new religion likely was compelling to some converts precisely because Jesus' resurrection was regarded as furnishing direct, firsthand answers to the epistemological anxieties of death and afterlife. This was the argument made by the unnamed warrior, and Bede reports that it carried the day for Christianity.

The history of paganism in the Kingdom of Northumbria was far from over, however. A scant five years after his adoption of Christianity, Edwin was killed in battle with a pagan rival, King Penda of Mercia. Edwin's successor, Osric, "ascended with curses against the rites of the heavenly kingdom,"³⁵ and promptly reestablished paganism as the official religion of the realm. However the next king to take the throne, Oswald, restored Christianity to a firm footing, which persisted through subsequent reigns. Yet even this was not the final religious oscillation: paganism eventually would be reimported to Northumbria via the Viking invasions. The establishment of independent Viking settlements known as the Danelaw with its capitol at York (*Jórvík*) meant that, two centuries after Edwin's conversion to Christ, his kingdom was once again an epicenter for pagan religion and culture. In the ninth

33. Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity, 371–1386 A.D.* (London, 1997), 240.

34. Early Christian chroniclers like Bede make extensive use of the rhetorical device of "invented speech" to add drama to the historical scenes they described. Roger Ray, "Bede's *Vena Lex Historiae*," *Speculum* 55, no. 1 (1980): 1–21; S. D. Church, "Paganism in Conversion-Age Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* Reconsidered," *History* 93 (2008): 162–80.

35. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3:1, in *Bede: Historical Works*, ed. King, 1:326.

century, Anglo-Saxon churchmen were complaining about the veneration of pagan gods in Northumbria;³⁶ and as late as 1012, Archbishop Wulfstan of York was publicly inveighing against the presence of *wiccan* 7 *wælcyrrian* in the region: “wiccans and Valkyries.”³⁷ The process of conversion could be complex and oscillating.

A contrasting legend comes to us from the conversion of Frisia. As the Christian missionary Wulfram was evangelizing the region, he exerted himself particularly toward converting the local leader, Radbod (ruled 680–719), under the well-tested assumption that gaining the allegiance of a leader ultimately would mean the conversion of his people as well. Radbod, however, regarded Christianity as a foreign faith intimately linked to the expansionist designs of his Frankish neighbors to the south, who already had managed to wrest portions of Friesland from him. Thus Radbod tolerated the missionaries’ travels only when he felt in a position of weakness; at other times (particularly after the death of the Frankish leader Pepin of Herstal in 714) he expelled them and tried to root out the religion itself, burning churches and monasteries.

According to Wulfram’s *Vita*, however, at one point Radbod asked Wulfram to baptize him, and the two met at a stream. Radbod at first stepped into the water with every indication of acquiescence, but then he hesitated. He thought of all the generations of his ancestors who had lived and died before him as pagans. Their shades, suddenly restless in his mind, gave him pause. So Radbod turned to Wulfram and asked about the fate of his mighty Frisian forbears:

Where was the great multitude of kings and princes and the nobility of the Frisian people? Were they also in that heavenly kingdom that was being promised to him if he believed and accepted baptism? Or were they in the place Wulfram was calling “infernal damnation”?

Wulfram replied, “Make no mistake, distinguished Prince . . . your ancestors, the leaders of the Frisian people, all of whom died without baptism, have surely received a judgment of damnation. . . .”

36. Audrey L. Meaney, “Æthelweard, Ælfric, the Norse Gods, and Northumbria,” *Journal of Religious History* 6, no. 2 (1970): 105–32; Audrey L. Meaney, “Ælfric and Idolatry,” *Journal of Religious History* 13, no. 2 (1984): 119–35.

37. Neil Price, “Foreword: Heathen Songs and Devil’s Games,” in *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited*, ed. Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark, and Sarah Semple (Oxford, 2010), xiii. While the precise roles of such persons are ill understood, it is certain that both terms designate pagan individuals with supernatural powers, the latter specifically having to do with assisting the dead in some manner. Price points out that the terms may not be Danish loans, since “we have no way of telling whether the pre-Christian Saxons also had ‘proper’ Valkyries in the Scandinavian sense” (*ibid.*, x). See also Gerd Tellenbach, *The Church in Western Europe from the Tenth to the Early Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, 1993), 3.

Hearing this the king was incredulous. . . . He pulled his foot out of the baptismal waters and announced, "I cannot abandon my ancestors and the fellowship of all the greatest men of the Frisian people, in order to live with a motley band of paupers in heaven. . . . I would rather remain in the places that have been reserved for me and all the Frisian nation from time immemorial."³⁸

Radbod was faced with a choice: either abandon his ancestors to their eternal fate, whatever that might be, or else share it with them in lineal solidarity. In the end he remained a pagan precisely in order that he might join his forefathers.

King Radbod's choice to remain among his people in death, as in life, is a salutary reminder: conversion could be perceived as abandonment. It could mean separating oneself from one's blood history forever and entering the next world as a lonely stranger, with no expectation of a joyful greeting from one's parents and ancient forbears. Indeed, it appears that the prospect of an afterlife outside one's genetic and ethnic community, more than that of a life lived in new ways, was a very significant factor in causing potential pagan converts to waver. The above two case studies, though literary, effectively highlight an underlying theme that recurs continually in the conversion of northern Europe: the significance of the ancestors, and the hesitations engendered by the requirement to abandon them for all time when accepting the Christian faith. Some refused this sacrifice; others made it, but ambivalently and with great hesitation. Some new converts sought strategies to bring their dead kin into the fold retrospectively: King Harald of Denmark, for instance, disinterred his pagan father and relocated him to a Christian churchyard after his own conversion in about 960. Presumably, extending the benefit of Christian burial to Harald's kin would, he hoped, permit the family line to remain united even once sundered by his conversion to a new religion.³⁹ In a similar vein, some church buildings in the Rheinland and in Sweden appear to have been erected directly above the burial sites of important ancestors for the leading local clans, thus consecrating their burial grounds after the fact.⁴⁰

The problem of how to imagine the pagan ancestors of Christian converts remained a vexing one: the newly faithful were reluctant to believe that all the previous generations of their family languished in torment; yet

38. *S. Vulfrannus Archiepiscopus Senonensis, Fontanellae et Abbauillae in Gallia, Appendix*, in *AASS*, 6 (March 20), 146–47.

39. Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 406.

40. Patrick Geary, "The Uses of Archaeological Sources for Religious and Cultural History," in *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, 37–38.

that was the teaching of their new faith. Imagining the fate of the ancient dead was an exercise in peril: either they were damned in the Christian hell, or perhaps lived on in some atavistic, pagan otherworld separate from the Christian afterlife, or worst of all, perhaps they wandered, adrift and homeless, lost between worlds. As we shall see, variations on these alternatives, and syncretistic combinations of them, all appear in medieval sources concerning the afterlife of the dead. As generations of missionaries slowly pushed back the frontiers of Christendom, advancing the faith through all the regions of Europe, they proved unable to exorcise these ghosts of the past. The dead flitted through a landscape in transition, at times appearing as malevolent, demonic presences, at times imagined as retrospectively (if imperfectly) Christianized forbears, and sometimes as both.

Populations in transition, even when they accepted the new religious ideology, did not immediately and irrevocably reorient their lives to conform to new dogmas. Archaeology tends to confirm an image of slow cultural convergence and intermingling, rather than a sudden replacement of one set of rites with another. The latest generation of studies has, for instance, rejected the dispositive value of “grave goods” as indicators of paganism, for far too many excavations contain both Christian religious objects and traditional pagan grave goods for these objects to be indicators of a clear religious preference.⁴¹ Excavations show that originally pagan burial customs continued well into the Christian period, perhaps indicating a desire to “hedge one’s bets” when it came to afterlife beliefs. Another recent archaeological study reveals that the pagan ritual of making foundation offerings when constructing homes—vessels containing food, sacrificed animals, small implements, and other tokens—actually *accelerated* after the introduction of Christianity to Poland, as part of the complex cultural process of clinging to past traditions while in the midst of widespread transformation.⁴² As material culture,

41. Ágnes Cs. Sós and Ágnes Salamon, *Cemeteries of the Early Middle Ages (6th–9th Centuries A.D.) at Pókaszeptek* (Budapest, 1995); Bonnie Effros, “*De partibus saxoniae* and the Regulation of Mortuary Custom: A Carolingian Campaign of Christianization or the Suppression of Saxon Identity?,” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 75 (1997): 267–86; Guy Halsall, “Burial, Ritual, and Merovingian Society,” in *The Community, the Family, and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Joyce Hill and Mary Swan (Turnhout, 1998), 325–38; Bonnie Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, PA, 2002); Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*; Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford, 2009); Carver, Sanmark, and Semple, *Signals of Belief in Early England*; Jo Buckberry and Annia Cherryson, *Burial in Later Anglo-Saxon England, c. 650–1100 A.D.* (Oxford, 2010).

42. Justyna Baron, “Ritual and Cultural Change: Transformations in Rituals at the Junction of Pagan Religion and Christianity in Early Medieval Poland,” in *Rytm przemian kulturowych w pradziejach i średniowieczu* [The rhythm of cultural change in prehistory and the Middle Ages], ed. Bogusław Gedig et al. (Warsaw, 2012), 449–63.

so too, immaterial culture preserved traces of cultural convergence, rather than wholesale replacement.

Thus, even after the assimilation of formerly pagan populations to the Christian church, earlier cultural practices and imaginative constructs persisted, whether as active deeds of resistance or as inheritances of custom and folklore that continued to be considered meaningful. People who venerated saintly relics still thought of their dead ancestors as nearby, active presences; Christians who prayed for the swift salvation of their kinfolk sometimes buried them with pagan tokens or grave goods; many with faith in the resurrected Christ still feared the dangerous dead who might roam from their graves. The pagan dead haunted the new world that was coming into being.

Pagan Survivals in Christian Europe

I am not suggesting that medieval society was cryptopagan, nor that the macabre traditions that we can trace back to various paganisms persisted unchanged. My starting point is, rather, the opposite: these motifs were regarded as unproblematically Christian by the time they were recorded, even when they originated from outside Christian tradition. My project, then, is simply to take seriously the contributions of earlier pagan societies to the distinctively medieval culture that superseded them. Imaginings of the dead permit me to track this cultural process.

Yet, such a project requires a light hand. How might we analyze “survivals” from an antecedent religious tradition into a period when that religion no longer claims adherents or devotees? Some extreme positions have been staked out in answer to this question. In my view, arguments that deny any persistent medieval influence from pagan cultures (for instance, by suggesting that all references to pagan traditions are merely empty repetitions of outdated earlier texts) are equally as reductive as those that present paganism as a full-blown, structured religion that survived underground.⁴³ Surely the truth lies somewhere between the shoals of these two treacherous extremes. A sensible middle course has been proposed by João de Pina-Cabral. He notes, first, that the modern social sciences tend to “devalue evidences of relative invariance [that] . . . loom in the shadows,”⁴⁴ with the result that we

43. An influential statement of the former position is Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlichtheologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1979); for the latter, see Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921).

44. João de Pina-Cabral, “The Gods of the Gentiles Are Demons: The Problem of Pagan Survivals in European Culture,” in *Other Histories*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (London, 1992), 49. I am indebted to David Frankfurter for bringing this essay to my attention.

do yet not possess a set of analytic tools that is fully adequate to the evolving meaningfulness of stable beliefs or customs through time. It is necessary to go beyond merely recognizing the existence of certain stories or aspects of popular culture in medieval Christian Europe that descended, in part, from an anterior paganism. If we were to adopt the notion of “pagan survivalism” in a facile way, we might readily fall into romantic notions of a pagan peasantry wholly untouched by the Christian teachings of the elite. This is a characterization with roots in Enlightenment ideology, and one that modern scholars of medieval popular culture have sometimes falsely been accused of maintaining.⁴⁵ The language of survivalism, while apposite, can tend to suggest a narrative of wholly nonselective reproduction, leading to slow cultural denaturation, increasing irrelevance, and ossification.

Yet cultural transmission need not be conceived in unconscious, passive terms. We might challenge ourselves instead to think of long-term cultural survivals as both selective and specific, thus foregrounding the agency of the communities that preserved them. What persists is significant and repeated; what withers is deprioritized and neglected. Cultural survivals, then, are consciously and actively *chosen*. From this perspective, we are able to discern the perpetual renewal, relevance, and specificity of those cultural formations that persist fixedly over many centuries and their continued vitality within the communities that sustained them. We can take continuities across time seriously as dynamic expressions of continuously relevant local knowledge—knowledge that is selectively rather than reflexively upheld.

Finally, with full and careful attention to the specificities of temporal change, we can historicize the shifting horizons of meaning embodied in

45. The scholarly literature on popular culture is vast. However, a cohesive multilateral debate emerges from these works: Harmening, *Superstitio*; Peter Burke, “From Pioneers to Settlers: Recent Studies of the History of Popular Culture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 1 (1983): 181–87; Thomas Tentler, “Seventeen Authors in Search of Two Religious Cultures,” *Catholic Historical Review* 71, no. 2 (1985): 248–57; John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (1986): 519–52; Michel Lauwers, “‘Religion populaire,’ culture folklorique, mentalités: Notes pour une anthropologie culturelle du moyen âge,” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* 82 (1987): 221–58; Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Introduzione,” in *Religione, folklore, e società nell’Occidente medievale* (Bari, 1988), 1–27; Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge, 1988); Rudi Kühnel, “Paganisme, syncrétisme et culture religieuse populaire au Haut Moyen Âge: Réflexions de méthode,” *Annales E.S.C.* 47, nos. 4–5 (1992): 1055–69; Ludo J. R. Milis, ed., *The Pagan Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1998); Carl Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2007), 68–106; Stella Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia: “Double Belief” and the Making of an Academic Myth* (New York, 2007); and the superb overview by Gábor Klaniczay, “‘Popular Culture’ in Medieval Hagiography and in Recent Historiography,” in *Agioграфия e Culture Popolari / Hagiography and Popular Cultures: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Verona (28–30 ottobre 2010) in ricordo di Pietro Boglioni*, ed. Paolo Golinelli (Bologna, 2012), 17–44.

these “survivals.” For even as stories and practices persisted beyond pagan societies and into the Christian Middle Ages, their frameworks and meanings evolved radically over time. To ground this point in an example: the motif of an army of wandering shades originated in the Teutonic pagan belief in the *Einherjar*, an army of dead warriors under the command of the god Odin. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, the army of the dead came to be used as an exemplum of purgatorial penance. In one rendering, the army of the dead even becomes a heavenly host sent from above! Clearly the meaning of the motif shifted radically as it moved through different cultural contexts, even as the basic form of the tale remained recognizably intact.

Recovering both the public and the hidden aspects of medieval beliefs thus involves negotiating seen and unseen levels of texts, reading both for what is said too markedly and for what is left unsaid. My primary strategy in the chapters that follow will be to separate as far as possible the interpretations of ecclesiastical authors from the basic “cultural facts” of the stories they recount. By “cultural facts” I mean the most minimal description of what things are reported to have occurred (hence “facts”) and were held as true by the community that circulated the report (hence “cultural”).⁴⁶ Thus I focus upon close readings of individual sources, with particular attention to hybridities, inconsistencies, and multiple meanings. These ruptures, in turn, provide a point of entry into issues of cultural pluralism, unveiling the diversity of cultural strands that are knit together in the sources.

Organization of the Book

The title *Afterlives* has two levels of meaning. On the one hand, this book literally concerns different versions of afterlife, stemming from different cultural and regional milieux. The book takes death and afterlife as a springboard for an inquiry into how cultural attitudes shifted, diverged, and overlapped through varying contexts and social strata. It juxtaposes universalizing discourses such as theology and medicine with regional case studies, in order to cast light upon the multiplicity of cultural traditions in the Middle Ages and their conceptualizations of the human. A secondary resonance of the title *Afterlives* pertains more broadly to historical processes of cultural and religious transformation. Thus the title also refers to the fact that many medieval ways of imagining postmortem existence preserve an afterlife of paganism, so to speak, long after the pagan religions of Europe had become

46. This discussion is reprised from Caciola, “Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture,” 10.

moribund. The words Ronald Hutton penned about witchcraft could equally well apply here: “there remain aspects of the subject which we can only begin to understand properly if they are studied within a framework of diverse and differing regional cultures characterized by belief systems which derived from much earlier traditions.”⁴⁷ Yet, just as the afterlife of a human person usually is imagined as only a partial survival, involving some form of loss—the soul without a body, the body without an intellect, the spirit without a social persona—so, too the afterlife of medieval pagan cultures, as they emerge in the following pages, is only fragmentary and partial. Much has been left behind, irretrievable, and the fragments of evidence that survive are frequently disconnected and contingent.

The chapters that follow are grouped into three subsections. The pair of chapters in Part One analyze the writings on death of the medieval intellectual classes. Chapter 1 focuses upon scripture and the formative traditions of the church fathers, while chapter 2 shifts focus to medieval medical knowledge as discussed within natural philosophy. Thus this first section of the book is dedicated to universalizing discourses produced by the most educated sectors of society.

Part Two of the book presents three detailed case studies of how return from the dead was imagined within northern Europe. Here, the returned dead were conceptualized as embodied (that is, as revenants) and often as extremely dangerous and violent. Chapters 3 and 4 each trace a different motif in which the dead were imagined as collective groups, conducting their postmortem existence in well-organized societies that mirror those of the living. Chapter 5 turns to a discussion of individual revenants and tries to tease out some of the underlying logic of belief in the medieval undead.

The third section moves to the Mediterranean regions. Here stories about return from the dead took a different form—literally. Rather than imagining the dead returning as embodied beings, as in northern Europe, here tales of postmortem return involved spirits or ghosts. Chapter 6 examines accounts of disembodied shades who appear to one living person, who then learns to act as a spirit medium for the dead. The seventh and last chapter examines individuals possessed by ghosts, usually the spirits of those who died while young adults. Finally, a short conclusion tries to tease out some of the insights to be gained from the above series of focused studies.

A note concerning translations: Most of the quotations of original documents in *Afterlives* are my own translations. The footnotes provide guidelines: in all cases where the cited volume is exclusively in Latin, where it contains

47. Ronald Hutton, “Witch-Hunting in Celtic Societies,” *Past & Present*, no. 212 (2011): 71.

both a Latin edition and an English translation of the text, or where it is an edition of a medieval vernacular text (e.g., in medieval French, Portuguese, German, or English), then the linked quotation is my own translation into English. Quoted biblical passages have been translated directly from the Latin Vulgate. In cases where a footnoted work presents only an English edition, then the translator of that volume is responsible for the English rendering.

☛ PART ONE

Imagining Mortality

Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of the greatest importance. Death is the gateway to the other world in more than the literal sense . . . love of the dead and loathing of the corpse, passionate attachment to the personality still lingering about the body and a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over—these two elements seem to mingle and play into each other.

—Bronislaw Malinowski, “Magic, Science, and Religion” (2009)

Death remains elusive. For the living it must always be an imagined experience, albeit one regarded with terror. Human cultures ever and always have strived to pierce through mortality’s shroud, unearth death’s secrets, and see into the shadowy world that is imagined to exist postmortem. How does a living person become an inanimate object? Where does the personality or self go, and what rites are owed to the corpse? As Malinowski’s quote so vividly suggests, imagining the dead is a complex process fraught with both love and repulsion.

Medieval Christianity was built upon the memory of a violent death and fueled by a promise of eternal transcendence of death for the faithful. Thus mortality bracketed the religion’s founding and its future: any study of medieval thanatologies must begin here. The notion that the human person had a double nature, being comprised of both a spiritual and a material self in intimate union with one another, was central to Christian anthropology. For theologians, then, the chief concern in analyzing life and death was to understand how the soul inhabited the body and how the bond between the two ruptured at death. Likewise, in imagining the afterlife Christian thinkers struggled to determine the exact conditions under which the soul would persist in a disembodied state after death and

whether it could interact with those still living. These questions are central to the first part of this book.

Chapter 1, “*Mors: A Critical Biography*,” discusses the interrelationships of body and soul from a theological viewpoint. It takes up the foundational Christian mythology of death and resurrection, the formation of the cult of the martyrs in the early church, and patristic debates about death and return from the dead. The focus here is upon the coexistence of multiple strands of interpretation and what this diversity signified within an institution that commonly policed its doctrines with great zeal. Chronologically this chapter, which ends in the seventh century, may be regarded as a prequel to the other portions of the book. It presents the formative traditions that later generations, in the high and late medieval periods, looked to for guidance. The presuppositions about death and afterlife that were established in the early centuries of the church continued to be important touchstones throughout the Middle Ages.

If the harsh reality of death is a key inspiration for religious yearnings, so too is death a chief preoccupation of medical inquiries. Like medieval theology, medieval medicine also was rooted in the idea that a union of body and soul was the fundamental basis for human existence. Once the soul left the body, the latter perished. Thus the second chapter in the pair that comprises this section is dedicated to medical thought. If theology attempted to understand life and death by focusing on the soul, then medicine sought the same answers by focusing on the body. The two branches of inquiry had significant overlaps, even as they focused on differing aspects of human selfhood. In particular, chapter 2 charts developments in the understanding of death engendered by the efflorescence of medieval medical theories that began in the twelfth century. “*Diagnosing Death*,” shows that an increasingly medicalized view of death took hold in medieval culture between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries; through the analysis of numerous different sources and genres, it explores how death was diagnosed and understood as a physical process. Because this chapter takes us to the end of the medieval period in the fifteenth century, it also suggests a terminus for the history of death in this period. The rising authority of scientific epistemologies is one of the most important developments for understanding the culture of the later Middle Ages, and the history of death is no exception. By the end of the period, the prestige of such approaches to death had increased to the point that medical definitions were coming to the forefront of broader conversations about death and afterlife.

Medieval theology and medicine represent two distinct but ultimately harmonious intellectual approaches to death. Medical theorists were also, of

course, literate and well-educated Christians: they looked to the Bible as well as to the body for instruction. In fact, these thinkers also voraciously read pagan and Arabic writings on human physiology, taking inspiration from as many sources as they could find. Yet theology and medicine had something else important in common as well: both were universalizing discourses that presented themselves as authoritative interpretations of reality for all times and places. Understanding the debates and areas of consensus that emerged within these two translocal discourses, then, is a necessary prelude to investigating more local cultural formations. Hence this first section provides a basis for comparison for the later sections of this book, which will focus upon more uniquely regional macabre motifs and ways of imagining the dead. For now, let us turn our attention to death as a “gateway to meaning,” to paraphrase Malinowski, within some broadly shared discourses of the Middle Ages.