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Late Medieval and Early Modern
Europe*

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9 Whose body? A study of attitudes towards the dead body in early modern Paris

Vanessa Harding

Early modern cities present the historian of death with a rich field of study: the combination of large numbers of people struggling for economic well-being and social identity and status, with high normal and even higher epidemic death rates, and severe limitations on the availability and possible uses of space, meant that the disposal of the dead was bound to be a major concern. The interests of the living competed with those of the dead, but could never wholly override them: all must have been conscious of a future personal interest in the treatment of the dead, as well as perhaps an emotional involvement with some of the recent dead.

This chapter examines attitudes towards the dead body, as exemplified by arrangements for funerals and burials, in Paris between around 1550 and 1670.¹ It seeks to establish, not so much what people said should happen to the bodies of the dead, but what happened in practice – the care, or lack of it, which the living accorded to the corpses of their contemporaries and predecessors – and to use this to further our understanding of the mentality of early modern urban dwellers. It is part of a wider enquiry, to explore the attitudes of the living to the dead in Paris and London, and to consider the ways in which this can illuminate the nature of these two metropolitan societies, in the sixteenth and seven-

¹ It is based on archival research in Paris, principally the eighteenth-century antiquaries' extracts (Bibliothèque Nationale (hereafter BN), MSS Français 32838, 32588, 32589) from some of the now-lost burial registers of early modern Paris, and other parish material in the Archives Nationales (hereafter AN). Two invaluable studies are Pierre Chaunu, *La mort à Paris: XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1978) which draws, among other things, on a large number of thèses de maîtrise which analyse wills, pious provision and testamentary discourse; and Jacqueline Thibaut-Payen *Les morts, l'église, et l'état dans le ressort du Parlement de Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1977). See also J. Hillairet, *Les deux cent cimetières du vieux Paris* (Paris, 1958).

teenth centuries.² Looking at the treatment of the corpse can also take discussion of the body, and the ways in which it is apprehended and understood, a stage further than the predominant focus on the living; dead bodies were as variably constructed, as liable to objectification (even commodification), as exposed to contest and competition over meaning as living ones. This particular study highlights the issues of control and ownership, among the complexity of reactions to the materiality of bodies, and offers an insight into power relations in a wider social and spatial environment.

One important theme, however, that I have not attempted to bring into the discussion is the spiritual dimension of death, burial and commemoration. The presumption of an afterlife and a continuing immaterial entity called the soul is obviously fundamental to the practices discussed, and deserves much fuller treatment than could be given here. The salvatory needs of the soul dictated many of the rituals enacted over the body, and belief in the resurrection of the body as an aspect of immortality added a significant complication to thinking about the appropriate treatment of mortal remains. It is possible, nevertheless, to consider the dead body as, primarily, belonging to this world, and its treatment as a reflection of priorities and concerns to do with life rather than the afterlife.

Identity and personalisation

The moment of death and the irresistible progress of time present a new range of problems for society in relation to the body. For how long does the dead human body retain the meanings and values it held in life, once it no longer has an incumbent but is perceived by outsiders only? If the body is composed or constituted socially as well as physically, is there a close synchrony between the dissolution of the person and physical decomposition? I will argue that, while there are some themes that run consistently through the attitudes of the living to the bodies of the dead, there is an important distinction between attitudes to the corpse that can be identified with a person, and attitudes to the 'depersonalised' corpse.

² This will take the form of a monograph, *The Living and the Dead in Early Modern London and Paris*. See also V. Harding, "And One More may be Laid There": the Location of Burials in Early Modern London', *London Journal* 14 (1989), pp. 112–29; V. Harding, 'Burial on the Margin: Distance and Discrimination in the Early Modern City', in M. Cox (ed.) *Grave Concerns: Death and Burial in England, 1700–1850* (Council for British Archaeology Research report 113, York, 1998), pp. 54–64.

What was a permissible way to treat one category might not be at all acceptable for the other.

The ways in which people treated the bodies of their close relatives, friends or neighbours reflected a strong sense of both the individuality and the social persona of the deceased, and this identification muted or delayed other feelings about the corpse – superstition, fear, anxiety. A body without those individualising and personalising associations, however, was viewed more starkly as a source of danger – moral or environmental – or at least trouble and expense. At the same time, every body is viewed from a number of different standpoints: almost every corpse is a personalised body for someone, and every dead body presents some danger and has to be safely disposed of. It is the balance between the two that is crucial: the extent to which relatives, friends or colleagues can impose their own perception of a particular corpse on a wider circle of society is in itself a measure of social power. Those who in life had the smallest or least influential social circle, and especially those who through poverty or sickness had lost control over their own destinies and even over their living bodies, becoming dependent on charity or hospital care, were also those whose bodies after death were most likely to be treated pragmatically and impersonally. This was in practice a very large category: in Paris, especially after the creation of the Hôpital-Général in 1656, deaths in institutions made up a very significant proportion of the total. In 1670, the first year of the Bills of Mortality, 21,461 people died in the whole of Paris; over 5,000 of these died in hospitals, including over 4,000 in Hôtel Dieu.³

The length of time over which the personalised view is sustained is also important. Even the most highly individualised corpse is subject to the irreversible processes of physical decay which will make its presence unacceptable to the living before long. Post-mortem decay literally dissolves the integrity of the physical body, merging the deceased with 'the earth from whence he came'; consciousness of decay, of the physical changes that the corpse undergoes that take it further and further from the recognisable human individual, also undermines the sense of personalisation. Social or rather financial power can resist this, deferring the consciousness of decay, and therefore the loss of personal identification, for the longest possible period. Embalming can postpone decay itself; much more common and important is the establishment of a secure

³ BN, Printed books, Reserve, L k/7 6745: printed bills of mortality from 1670. Cf. L. Bernard, *The Emerging City. Paris in the Age of Louis XIV* (Durham, NC, 1970), pp. 132–55.

burial site, in which the corpse will be protected against intrusion and exhumation which would inevitably draw attention to its physical metamorphosis. Marking the burial site, erecting epitaphs naming or even visually representing the dead, and reciting their qualities, can also support the illusion that the grave contains the body of a person, not a dissolving corpse. The endowment of memorial services and explicit occasions for recollection, directed as they are towards spiritual ends, may seem to lead attention away from the body, but in many cases such services were said over the grave-site, and thus recalled again the physical existence of the deceased. Lead coffins, which themselves survive indefinitely, but which conceal or disguise the decay of the body they contain, also preserved a physical focus for prayer and commemoration.

Few of such rituals of protection and preservation were available to the more modest Parisians and the poor, though they did not lose their identity immediately. Their deaths would have been recorded in the original parish registers; the chaplain at Hôtel Dieu was charged with noting the names and *pays* of the sick in his book, and also with writing them on a piece of paper which he was to attach to their arms 'that they may be known at death and also in life'.⁴ The poor could do little, however, to protect the bodies of their fellows once consigned to the ground, especially when burial took place in mass graves (*fosses communes*), as seems to have been common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Paris: the individual was rapidly and wholly assimilated into the category of 'the dead'. Those whose family and friends were buried in this way must have been aware that in a very few years – well within the memory of the living – the surviving skeletal remains would be dug up and stored, without any sense of the personal.⁵ On the other hand, this process, that separated and extinguished the individual so rapidly, also transmuted the body from a cadaver to a relic, and recovered some spiritual meaning for the physical remains.

Another complex aspect of the personalisation/ loss of personalisation of the corpse is the attitude of the living person towards his or her own future physical state. Nobody ever sees his or her own corpse: even at the point of death, the living subject is not directly faced with the reality of post-mortem physical changes, familiar as he or she may be with the discourse of decay. However conscientiously an individual might observe the exhortation to contemplate mortality and physical corruption,

⁴ L. Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire des Archives Hospitalières antérieures a 1790. Hôtel Dieu* (4 vols., Paris, 1882–9), II, p. 107.

⁵ See Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 12–13.

however vivid his or her imaginative projection, essentially there remained a distinction between the body he or she understood himself or herself to inhabit, and the idea of the body – the corpse or cadaver – that was the object of contemplation. Consequently, while the requests or prescriptions of the dying for the treatment of their own bodies after death quite obviously demonstrate the ‘personalisation’ of the corpse, there is a real difference in viewpoint from the responses of the survivors to the real corpse. The nuisance-value or environmental hazard of one’s own corpse was rarely envisaged. It is clear that many believed that their body would retain some sensibility after death, and their provisions reflect this. The request for burial in a particular or familiar place, near to friends or family, presupposes some idea of post-mortem communion or contact. Even those who explicitly acknowledged the inevitability of decay made some defence against it, such as Nicolas Lambert, *conseiller du roi* and *secrétaire de ses finances*, who recognised in his holograph will of 1646 that his body would soon be reduced to corruption and ashes according to nature, but nevertheless asked that it be treated with honour and modesty according to his condition, because it had been the domicile of his soul and the recipient of holy communion.⁶

Clearly, responses to the dead body varied in other ways too. Social categorisations of the living informed attitudes to the dead, perhaps particularly when the categorisation was itself involved with the cause of death, as with heretics and excommunicates, criminals (especially traitors) and suicides. As persons who were outside normal society, their bodies were liable to be treated in ways that emphasised their exclusion from the normal. In some cases the corpse had to bear the full brunt of society’s disapproval of its owner’s actions in life; ritual degradation of the body, dismemberment, distribution were a way of taking revenge.⁷

Heretics (Protestants) in Paris suffered all kinds of humiliations and penalties after death as well as before. Isolated incidents in the 1560s, when some burials according to reformed rites in Catholic churchyards, including the Innocents, were dug up and cast out, indicated that this would be an arena of conflict. Even after Protestant funeral rights and burial locations were in theory secured, they were subject both to official restriction and to popular attack. Further attempts to share traditional burial grounds with Catholics were resisted, and finally forbidden.

⁶ Will printed in Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, p. 516.

⁷ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 282–4; cf. J. Merrick, ‘Patterns and Prosecutions of Suicide in 18th-century Paris’, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 16 (1) (1989), pp. 24–5, 29.

Protestants were confined to using cemeteries on the outskirts of the city, formerly used for plague victims, victims of fifteenth-century massacres, and the dead of Hôtel Dieu. Vexatious prosecution and rigorous application of the burial laws made life more and more difficult, until, with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, even these grounds were closed. The bodies of those who died outside the Church were thereafter subject to exemplary punishment, including being dragged through the mud.⁸

Others who were in some way not full members of society might also be treated differently: the most obvious, and difficult case, is that of children, especially chrismos, neonates and stillborns. Were these really human, did they deserve the full rites and respect accorded to adults or those of years of discretion? How far could 'personalisation' of the corpse operate in these cases, when the living being had barely developed any individuality, though it might inherit a social persona from its parents?⁹

Those who had already 'died to the world' by entering an enclosed religious community formed another distinct group in or on the edge of society, but in this case it was a privileged group: their obsequies would be fully observed and attended, their careful burial guaranteed. In any case, these bodies did not impinge upon public sensibility, because they were kept out of public view. As an ideal of safe and sacred burial they may have influenced the burial choices of the laity: convent burial apparently became a more popular choice in the course of the seventeenth century, with the revival of the religious orders in the Catholic Reformation.¹⁰

The bodies of those who died of an infectious disease (principally plague in this period) constitute another special case, given anxieties about the role of the corpse in the dissemination of disease. The firm direction of affairs in Paris meant that orders relating to plague burials were strictly enforced, with bodies being buried quickly and not in churches.¹¹ The rigour of the law could be modified, however, by other considerations: one young man of good family, Pierre Séguier, who died of the plague in 1591, was buried – on that account – in the churchyard,

⁸ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 264–72; Thibaut-Payen, *Les morts, l'église, et l'état*, pp. 94–185. See also the chapter by Penny Roberts in this volume.

⁹ See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert Baldrick (New York, 1965), pp. 38–40. See the contribution by Will Coster in this volume.

¹⁰ Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, p. 321; Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 143–264.

¹¹ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, p. 284.

but a few months later permission was given for his exhumation and reburial in the church near his ancestors' chapel.¹²

The impact of gender on burial practices is hard to discern, or at least to expose. Men and women of the same family and status appear to have merited equal treatment. Chaunu found no 'sexual dimorphism' in sixteenth-century burial choices.¹³ Not enough is recorded of the burials of children to see whether there was discrimination at this level. Clearly, gender was a defining aspect of some status groups – principally the clergy – which obtained privileged burial for themselves, and at the opposite end of the scale there were widows and prostitutes, notably poor and/or socially reprehended groups. The convents of men appear to have attracted a greater number and variety of elite burials than the convents of women,¹⁴ but the men's houses were on the whole larger, wealthier and more prestigious than the women's, as well as more numerous, so the difference is probably not directly significant. It could even be argued that in this respect, as in others, mortality tends actually to erase gender, at least in the medium term.

If the distinction between the personalised corpse and the depersonalised one is fundamental to the response of the living to the dead, and the category matters too, there is still a range of common emotions. These include feelings of actual tenderness, reverence, superstitious awe, horror or revulsion, and fear of contamination, often in combination. Such emotions might be felt by one individual at different times towards different corpses; or they might be experienced in relation to a single corpse by the different people who confronted it. In order to explore the interplay of responses to the dead body, this chapter follows the corpse chronologically from death-bed to interment and beyond. The length of time the corpse remained among the living, the rituals enacted over it, the respect paid to it, and the precautions taken to protect it after it was left in the grave or tomb are all important elements in the argument.

Death to burial

Pre-modern burials were normally swift, with a small number being very protracted. The speed with which bodies were buried in Paris seems at least to have matched urban norms in early modern England, where perhaps 65 to 70 per cent had been buried by the second day after

¹² BN, MS Fr 32589, 15 Sept. 1591.

¹³ Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, pp. 320–1.

¹⁴ See Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 143–232.

death.¹⁵ Given the selective nature of the surviving burial records, totally reliable statistics for Paris are not available, but examination of a sample of 600 cases from the parish of Saint-André-des-Arts between 1550 and 1670 offers some plausible figures. Of these, largely bourgeois or *noblesse de robe*, 24 per cent were buried on the day of death, 50 per cent on the day after, and 16.5 per cent on the third day, so that just over 90 per cent had been buried by the end of the third day after death. Funerals of the poor are not represented in this sample: these would probably bring down the death–burial interval still further. There would be little reason for delay: no elaborate arrangements to be made, a common grave already open, not to mention the cramped living conditions of the poor and the unlikelihood of preservative measures.¹⁶

Long-distance convoys were largely confined to the highest groups in society – burial outside Paris was usually on the deceased's family estate – so in that sense a long death–burial interval is a mark of class. The expense of a large convoy over several days must have been considerable, and in such cases embalming was probably essential. The convoy of Maître Jean de l'Aultry, *conseiller ordinaire du Roy* and vicomte of Levignan and Bèze, left Paris four days after his death, but it must have taken several more days to reach Bèze near Dijon.¹⁷ The body of Dame Gasparde de la Chastre remained in the chapel of her husband's family at Saint-André-des-Arts for seventeen days before it was taken away for burial at Villebon.¹⁸

While the body was treated formally, even ritually, it was not shunned. In the interval between death and burial, bodies were kept in private houses, handled, watched and prayed over, and their presence was accepted with apparent equanimity. The way in which the corpse was treated in the interval between death and burial tends however to emphasise the dichotomy between personalised and depersonalised bodies. The bodies of the middling and upper classes were treated carefully and with respect; those of the poor received more casual treatment.

The corpses of the better-off normally remained in the place of death until removed for service and/or interment. The registers of Saint-André-des-Arts often note the place of death ('mort en son hotel', 'mort en l'hotel de Thou', 'mort chez son frère Claude, logé en la rue Pavée') and

¹⁵ S. Porter, 'Death and Burial in a London Parish: St Mary Woolnoth, 1653–99', *London Journal* 8 (1982), pp. 76–80.

¹⁶ BN, MS Fr 32589 (eighteenth-century extracts from the burial registers of the parish of Saint-André-des-Arts). This is the source of the data in this and the following paragraph.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, entry for 5 Mar. 1645.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, entry for 4 July 1616.

this would be logical if this is where the convoy started from.¹⁹ The bodies of persons who died in the street, whether accidentally or violently, could not have stayed there, of course, but the baron de Thiers, attacked by enemies on his way home after supper, died in the house of an unrelated person and his body remained there for five days, before being removed to the family chapel in the parish church. It is also possible that the convoy of Messire Jacques le Coigneux, *conseiller au Parlement*, started from the house of the linendraper on the pont Saint-Michel where he had died suddenly the previous night.²⁰ The vicar of the dean of Paris, who claimed funeral rights over the bodies of clerics in his domain, recorded the house, and often the room, in which death took place, and clearly expected to collect the body from that place. On a couple of occasions the body was waiting for him and his associates in the courtyard of the house, but on others he may well have entered the chamber.²¹ Instructions to the parish gravedigger (repeated in a number of parish vestry books in the later seventeenth century) make it clear that he was expected to deliver the pall, the bier and if necessary trestles to the house where the dead person was, and bring them back with the body; an eighteenth-century gravedigger complained of having to go up to the fifth or sixth floors of some houses to collect bodies. The fact that these would have been the bodies of poorer persons – and for charity funerals the gravedigger got very little, if anything – added to his grievance.²² On the other hand, the *emballeurs* (those deputed to shroud the dead) of Hôtel Dieu were also paid to seek and remove bodies from private houses and take them to Hôtel Dieu, presumably for shrouding and a charity burial.²³

If French practice was similar to English, the corpse would be washed, dressed at least in a shift,²⁴ wrapped in a shroud, placed in a coffin or bier, and covered with a pall, ready for the watch or vigil. Since death-burial intervals were normally so short, this can rarely have lasted the three days suggested by Chaunu.²⁵ Parish records give some confirmation of the rituals around the corpse. Parishes could supply both the pall to cover the body, and the *argenterie*, the silver cross and branches for the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *passim*. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, entries for 8 Apr. 1565 and 18 Jan. 1623.

²¹ AN, L510, microfilm no. 27.

²² AN, LL805, p. 255; BN, MS Fr 21609, fol. 37; AN, L663 (unnumbered eighteenth-century papers concerning charity burials at Saint-Jean-en-Grève).

²³ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, p. 103.

²⁴ Though Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, p. 350, says that the poor remained naked under the shroud.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

candles, for the vigil: it was the gravedigger who delivered them to the house of the deceased, after negotiation with the family and the parish clergy. Most parishes had a range of palls and silverware, available at graduated prices to suit all pockets (and to demonstrate the deceased's wealth and status).²⁶ At the other end of the scale, many parishes had a charity pall, which they supplied free.²⁷

The rituals of the vigil had a dual function: to make the dead body safe while it remained among the living, and to begin the process of helping to save the soul. The safety of the body can be interpreted in several ways: the ritual of sprinkling it with holy water, after death and also again at the start of the funeral convoy, suggests that it was the safety of the observers that was at issue, as perhaps do the prayers said around it, but the constant presence of watchers also helped to save the body itself from outside intervention. Such intervention might have simple robbery of the corpse in mind, or theft of the body itself. The bodies of the dead of Hôtel Dieu were exposed to both dangers, even from those entrusted to look after them. They had already sacrificed some control of their bodies and possessions to the hospital, which took the clothes of those who died there, and either sold or reused them; the smaller hospital of Saint-Louis derived 120 *livres* from the sale of rings and other *gentillesse* of persons dying there in 1636.²⁸ In the 1650s Hôtel Dieu contracted with a wigmaker for the sale of the hair cut from the heads of the sick, but they did refuse a request, made in 1658, from the king's surgeon, to extract the teeth of the dead, even though he said it was for the public good.²⁹ Although anatomising of corpses was not widely practised in this period, surgeons were already beginning to look on the hospital as a useful source of bodies, legitimately or illegitimately obtained. In 1626 certain *emballeurs* were sacked for selling a corpse to a surgeon. They had shrouded the corpse and put it in the cart to be taken to the cemetery of la Trinité, but by arrangement they stopped just outside the hospital gate and handed over the body.³⁰ The gravedigger at la Trinité was accused in 1659 of despoiling corpses of their shrouds and even their shirts, and of selling the bodies to the surgeons.³¹

The masters of Hôtel Dieu, which saw itself as primarily a religious

²⁶ For example, at Saint-Jean-en-Grève: AN, LL805, pp. 253–5; BN, MS Fr 21609, fol. 37.

²⁷ For example, at Saint-André-des-Arts: AN, LL687, fol. 183v.

²⁸ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, pp. 103, 116, 226; L. Brièle, *Collection des documents pour servir à l'histoire des hôpitaux de Paris* (4 vols., Paris, 1881–7), I, p. 7.

²⁹ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, pp. 110, 115. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³¹ Brièle, *Collection*, I, p. 138.

establishment, resisted the idea of scientific or experimental anatomy, and in 1655 ruled that no body, male or female, of any age or cause of death, be given to the surgeons for anatomy/dissection, such being contrary to Christian charity and humanity. However, they would permit surgeons of the house to open bodies if that would help them to establish the cause of death or relieve other sick or poor. The opening must be done in the manner in which the bodies of private persons were opened, and with great restraint and circumspection; afterwards, the body was to be shrouded and buried as usual.³² This firm statement of principle was not sustained in practice. Twice in the following year house surgeons were reprimanded for conducting autopsies without permission; in 1659 they were ordered to return the body of a child they had removed for autopsy. But by 1665 the masters authorised the house surgeons to open the bodies of those who died of the stone, for information, and allowed a Danish surgeon to have three or four heads for dissection, to furnish illustrations for a book. In 1667 they agreed – perhaps reluctantly – to Colbert’s request that members of his proposed academy of surgeons could open the bodies of Hôtel Dieu dead, but by 1681, the religious of the hospital complained that the surgeons were not treating the bodies properly: they did not reconstruct them for burial, but made skeletons of them and thus denied them Christian burial, which according to the canons of the Church should only be denied to the executed and excommunicates.³³

The convoy and funeral

The body had a central part to play in the funeral: its presence was essential to a sequence of rituals, from the convoy to the funeral service or services and the interment. It could also be the focus of demarcation disputes, when different groups might claim possession of the body as a symbol of their financial or jurisdictional rights.

If the vigil was the more private part of the funeral ceremony, the convoy brought the body into the light of day and the public space of street and church. Beginning usually from the place of death, the convoy accompanied the body to church for the funeral service, and if necessary on to the place of burial. The vicar of the dean of Paris described the procedure for the convoy in 1568 of Messire Nicole le Maistre, a canon of Notre Dame, *conseiller en Parlement* and president of the College of

³² Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, pp. 111–12.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 114, 115, 120, 122; Brièle, *Collection*, I, p. 218.

Prémontré. The vicar arrived with some of the priests of the cathedral at the man's house, to find the body laid ready in the courtyard and vigils being said. He sprinkled the body with holy water and, after the vigils were over, vested himself in rochet, surplice, stole, etc., in the presence of the vicar of Saint-Cosme, the parish in which the man died. He then took up the body and with *de profundis* and the orisons *inclina* and *fideliūm*, to which his own accompanying priests gave the responses, proceeded with torches and other lights and a cross carried before him to the church of the Cordeliers where the deceased had chosen burial. Several ecclesiastical dignitaries, two presidents of *Parlement* and other canons of Notre Dame accompanied the procession; two *conseillers en Parlement* carried corners of the pall.³⁴ The procedure was no doubt similar when the convoy was made up of parish priests, with family, friends and colleagues participating; it was common too to have a dozen poor people and/or some of the *enfants bleus*, the children from the city's orphan hospital. The *jurés-crieurs des corps et du vin*, one of Paris's privileged guilds, organised some convoys, announcing the funeral or sending out printed invitations, bringing together mourners, attendants and the poor men or women.³⁵ In most cases it appears that the body was carried by bearers on foot, but some convoys *en carosse* are noted, including some with lead coffins, and it seems unlikely that a lead coffin could have been carried any distance on foot.³⁶

The early modern period in Paris probably saw a more widespread use of coffins, both for interment but also for the convoy alone. Hôtel Dieu bought two *coffres ou bières* to carry bodies to the cemetery of the Innocents in 1517, and at Saint-Jean-en-Grève the parish had a *bière couverte* used for charity convoys.³⁷ For the middling and upper sorts, coffined interment was probably the norm. Such burials paid a premium, because they occupied the ground much longer: it was agreed that at the central city cemetery of the Innocents, burials of *corps nudz et sans coffre ou bière* would cost 5 *sous tournois* (of which 2 *sous* went to the gravedigger), while a *fosse à coffre* cost 35 *sous*, of which 5 *sous* went to the gravedigger.³⁸ Both wooden and lead coffins were used by the later seventeenth century: the latter, which lasted almost indefinitely, were used for burials in private chapels and vaults, but several churches either

³⁴ AN, L510, microfilm no. 27.

³⁵ Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, pp. 351–61; BN, MS Fr 21609, fols. 106–14.

³⁶ E.g. at Saint-André-des-Arts: AN, L1687, fol. 183v.

³⁷ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, p. 184; AN, L663. ³⁸ AN, L571/2.

banned them for burial in the generality of the church, or charged double for allowing their use.³⁹

Most convoys must have passed in an orderly fashion, without incident, but difficulties were possible. Parish priests were generally regarded as having the right to bury their parishioners, and receive the dues therefor, but exceptions were possible, and these could lead to trouble. The issue was generally the sharing of fees and rewards, but in practice disputes focused on possession of the body. Religious houses usually succeeded in claiming the bodies of their domestics, even when they lived outside the precinct, and the parish priest got nothing. Other individuals could choose burial in a church other than their parish church; parish priests were supposed to convoy the body to the chosen place of burial and hand it over, certifying that the individual had died in communion with the Church, for which they would share the lights of the convoy with the house of burial. However, the loss of the actual burial meant a loss of revenue to the priest and parish; it seems that they resented this encroachment on their privilege and sometimes the handing-over was done with a very bad grace. Thibaut-Payen cites some such cases in seventeenth-century Paris, when bodies were merely dumped at convent gates, and the parish reclaimed its pall or mortuary cloth, leaving the coffin bare; there was an actual affray in the street between the priest of St Paul and the Jesuits in 1655, before *Parlement* settled that bodies must be conveyed into the nave of the burial church before being handed over.⁴⁰

The dean of Paris's vicar kept his register of convoys because he was entitled to keep the torches and lights from the procession as a reward; usually he agreed amicably with other claimants, waiving strict protocol (such as his right to take the torches at the entry to the church) in the interests of a seemly funeral, but more than once he resorted to litigation after the event to enforce his rights. In 1569 he went to collect the body of a chaplain of Notre Dame who had died in the presbytery of the parish of St Geneviève les Ardents, but the parish priest refused to hand it over. The vicar asserted the dean's rights, but the priest refused again, and began to sing the *de profundis*; so the vicar left, to pursue his claim by litigation – successfully. A similar case later the same year, against the curé of Ste Madeleine en la Cité, was also successfully prosecuted.⁴¹

Charity convoys were furnished by the parishes, which sometimes

³⁹ AN, LL686, part 2, fol. 64v; AN, LL805, pp. 253–5.

⁴⁰ Thibaut-Payen, *Les morts, l'église, et l'état*, pp. 20–2, 40–66.

⁴¹ AN, L510, microfilm no. 27.

used a special pall, and the gravedigger was required to deliver and collect the bier, trestles, etc. as for other funerals.⁴² The Hôtel Dieu evidence suggests that those who died in the hospital were taken fairly unceremoniously, shrouded but not coffined, on a bier, cart or chariot, to one of the hospital's burial grounds (the Innocents, la Trinité or, by the late seventeenth century, Clamart).⁴³ Often more than one body at a time was taken; in times of great mortality the carts must either have been heavily laden or have gone several times a day. However, it was not quite without ceremony: the cart was accompanied by an ecclesiastic carrying a cross, and by two lit torches in summer, or two large lanterns (*falloz*) in winter.⁴⁴ These may suggest that the carts only went at night, or in the early morning, but this is not confirmed by regulation until 1681, when the gatekeeper of the porte Saint-Victor was given 4 *livres* a year for getting up to open the gate to let the cart for Clamart through at 4 a.m.⁴⁵

Not all those who died in hospital lost all control over their funerals. Hospitalisation of the sick was much more common in Paris than in England, as indicated above, and patients might come from reasonably prosperous families. Hôtel Dieu clearly anticipated that some of its dead would be claimed for private burial, and in 1618 it was accepted that the families of those who died at the hospital of Saint-Louis who wished to bury them separately and with a convoy could do so for a sum of not less than 3 *livres*, including payments to the master, chaplains, gravedigger, *emballeurs* and torchbearers.⁴⁶

The funeral service or services were said over the body itself, in the church, on its bier or hearse and again surrounded by candles and covered in a pall. Chaunu states, based on the sixteenth-century literature of the *arts de mourir*, that prayer for a body physically present was believed to be more valuable than prayer in its absence and, according to one of his seventeenth-century will samples, 95 out of 105 persons ordering obsequies wished them to be done in the presence of the corpse, so that it could participate for a last time in the mass.⁴⁷ The full gamut of funeral services, with high and low masses and all the psalms and prayers, was a long drawn-out process, however, and may well have begun before the body reached the church.

An obvious way in which the deceased person could control the whole context within which his or her corpse would be obsequied was through

⁴² See AN, L663.

⁴³ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, pp. 107, 110, 113, 115, 118; Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 23–38, 245–9.

⁴⁴ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Brièle, *Collection*, I, p. 220.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁷ Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, pp. 348, 359–60.

the choice of burial location. This choice, for Paris, has been quite extensively discussed by Chaunu and his students.⁴⁸ A large proportion of their sampled willmakers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries took the opportunity of specifying the location; even those who did not, but left it to their executors, may well have made their choice clear before death. The choices made seem to reflect a strong sense of the humanity of the corpse: while particularly sacred locations were certainly favoured, family and traditional associations were even stronger. Of a sample, 82 per cent made some choice of location; over half of these made a very precise choice, and nearly half of these asked to be buried near some member of the family or *lignage*. About 37 per cent of the sample, in all, wished to find themselves in death in the society of a dear one; a much smaller number chose 'devotionally'.⁴⁹ This suggests that the willmakers were not only thinking of their own corpses as preserving something of their own personality and feelings, but that they also had a strong sense that the bodies of their deceased relatives – in some cases long dead – retained a personal identity. The language is often affective: Etienne Tonnellier, curé of Saint-Eustache – a religious – wished to be buried in the vault where his late uncle and cousin lay 'so that death shall not separate those whom affection (*amitié*) united in life'.⁵⁰

After the funeral

From the moment of interment, or rather from the decision as to where interment was to take place, the experiences and expectations of the better-off and the more modest diverged markedly. Some testators had secured a permanent resting-place in a chapel or vault, with their body being protected from obvious decay by its lead coffin, from spiritual danger by the sacred location and the repetition of prayers and celebrations over it, from human interference again by the sacred location and by the legal agreements with the church; it might even be secured against human oblivion by being marked with an epitaph or declamatory monument, which again called attention to the body's presence with the words 'Cy git . . .' (here lies).⁵¹ Others, however, had no resources either to leave by will or to spend on a funeral. Although private marked graves in

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, chaps. 11–14. For London, see Harding, "And One More may be Laid There", pp. 112–29; V. Harding, 'Burial Choice and Burial Location in Later Medieval London', in S. R. Bassett (ed.), *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100–1600* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 119–35.

⁴⁹ Chaunu, *La mort à Paris*, pp. 325–6. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

⁵¹ See AN, LL434/B (Epitaphier of the cemetery of the Innocents).

churchyards continued to exist, the practice of opening large pits for the burial of many corpses was well established by the early sixteenth century, and probably much earlier.

The pressure of numbers must have forced Parisians into a kind of brutal pragmatism about burial for the masses from an early date: if the city had 3–400,000 inhabitants in the later Middle Ages (or even only 200,000), it might have needed to bury 8–15,000 bodies a year, and epidemics would multiply the numbers. It would not have been possible to bury all these in individual graves, and resort to mass interment must have been inevitable. By the sixteenth century we have explicit evidence. In 1512 the gravedigger at la Trinité made a pit containing 136.5 *toises* or fathoms; in 1549 his successor dug another great pit. One of 885 *toises* was dug in 1570, and in 1587 the gravedigger was paid 2 *écus sol* for digging several large fosses down to the water-table, each able to hold 700 or 800 bodies. The thousands buried there in the 1620s could only have been accommodated in mass graves.⁵² The secondary literature gives no date for the earliest use of mass graves at the Innocents, but it too appears to have been established practice by the sixteenth century, and certainly forms part of the popular perception of that location.⁵³

A final, and somewhat paradoxical, insight into the personalisation/depersonalisation of the corpse is given by one practice that had a variety of meanings, according to context: exhumation. This could reflect either an unusually successful retention of the corpse's identity, or its opposite, complete loss of that identity.

The records of Saint-André-des-Arts offer several examples of the former: a child that was buried and exhumed ten days after death to be restored to its seniors in another church; a young plague victim, hastily interred in his parish churchyard but exhumed six months later to be reburied with his family inside the church; the case of Dame Gasparde de la Chastre's body, transported eighteen days after her death to Villebon, and buried there, but exhumed and brought back to Paris the following year, to be buried beside her husband who had just died.⁵⁴ These cases certainly assert the continuing human identity of the corpse, months after death; but they also assert it in the context of a greater, family, identity, in which, arguably, the individual is subsumed. Is this the ultimate in the

⁵² Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, pp. 182, 193, 200, 219–23; Brièle, *Collection* (1887), IV, p. 32.

⁵³ Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 23–38.

⁵⁴ BN, MS Fr. 32589, entries for 29 May 1561, 15 Sept. 1591, 4 July 1616, 8 May 1617.

personalisation of the corpse; or is it the ultimate manipulation of someone else's corpse to make a point?

Exhumation could also mean the loss of identity, with the body exposed to assault or dismemberment. The exhumation of Protestant corpses is a case in point,⁵⁵ but more mundane motives might also operate: in 1673 the prévôt de Paris condemned persons who broke into the cemetery of Clamart to steal the teeth and hair of the dead.⁵⁶ Exhumation was however a normal part of the management of cemeteries, and in that context it offered a complex meaning. Part of the point of the mass graves was that, because they were filled up within a few weeks or months, and contained only shrouded not coffined bodies, which may have been layered with lime, the bodies decayed fairly evenly, and it was possible to open them up after a number of years (between nine and fourteen, according to eighteenth-century calculations).⁵⁷ The skulls and large bones were cleaned and stored in a charnel, the residue cleared, and the pit re-used for a new phase of burials.⁵⁸ No personal identity could survive this process, but it was essentially a respectful one, and it transformed the body from a dangerous decaying corpse into a safe, even sacred, physical form. The bones of the Christian dead offered a moral lesson, a reminder of mortality, and also conferred some sanctity on the place where they were stored. Despite the continual recycling of burials, the cemetery of the Innocents had an important place in the mythology of Parisian identity, and there was considerable opposition to its closure in the later eighteenth century.⁵⁹

The experience of the dead, if one can so put it, in early modern Paris, ranged from long-term physical preservation and maintenance of identity to rapid dissolution and personal oblivion. The great majority lost any control over their bodies soon after death (and sometimes before), and some indeed were very inadequately protected against external interference. Their bodies were treated pragmatically, as material objects that posed a particular set of problems – moral as well as environmental, perhaps, but overwhelmingly practical. However, it is arguable that the price of individualisation was to remain earth-bound; if assimilation into

⁵⁵ Thibaut-Payen, *Les morts, l'église, et l'état*, pp. 159–71.

⁵⁶ Brièle, *Inventaire-sommaire*, II, p. 23. ⁵⁷ BN, MS Joly de Fleury 1207.

⁵⁸ It was essentially the contents of parish charnels and pits, as well as those of the Innocents, which were transferred to the Catacombs before and especially after the Revolution: Hillairet, *Les 200 cimetières*, pp. 300–8.

⁵⁹ M. Foisil, 'Les attitudes devant la mort au XVIIIe siècle: sépultures et suppressions de sépultures dans le cimetière Parisien des SS-Innocents', *Revue Historique* 510 (1974), pp. 303–30.

a greater whole, representative of Paris as a timeless community, can compensate for the loss of a personal identity, then the dead buried at the Innocents had actually achieved translation to a higher sphere of being, a kind of apotheosis, that perhaps paralleled the idea of the absorption of the soul into a Christian heaven.