

How do we account for the changes observable in the commemoration of the dead in Italy and Northern Europe in this period?

‘Death is as much for the living as for the dead.’¹ A consideration of the processes of commemoration of the dead in any period may well lead one to draw similar conclusions to this statement of St Augustine’s. Especially when we make these considerations in the context of today’s culture, we could be forgiven for assuming that it has always been the case that the primary reason for remembering someone who has passed away is for the comfort and consolation of the living they leave behind. Such is today’s mentality towards death. The changes to commemoration which were apparent in Early Renaissance Italy and Northern Europe, however, cannot lean on such a simple explanation. The key to our understanding in this case is to remember that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, death was a far more accepted part of everyday life and religion than we allow it to be today, and so attitudes towards it differed accordingly.² Society’s reasons for beginning to commemorate its dead in a new manner were arguably complex and reflected changes to mentalities which society as a whole was experiencing on a wider scale.

Securing a good understanding of how methods of commemoration did change, it becomes immediately obvious that there are clear trends pointing towards explanations accounting for their occurrence. The sources generally used by historians, apart from physical evidence like tombs and monuments, are the last wills and testaments left by individuals. Such documents, because of pressures placed upon the testators by law and accepted social practice, were socially determined products and so are especially useful when conducting investigations such as this.³ One of the most obvious changes to occur was in the nature of burial sites. Increasingly in testaments, there appeared the tendency to elect your own burial site, as well as to mark the said site in some way so that a

¹ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1996), p.165

² John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the later Middle Ages* (Routledge, London, 2001), p.182

³ Samuel Cohn, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.16