

The social landscape of death: a theoretical perspective on funerary practices in Post-Medieval Portugal

A dimensão social da morte: reflexão teórica sobre práticas funerárias no Portugal Pós-Medieval



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Abstract Funerary practices and burial sites offer valuable insights into how societies conceptualise death and an enhanced perspective on communities' social, economic, and cultural contexts. The integration of archaeological data, historical records, iconographic and documentary sources, and socio-cultural anthropology strengthens the understanding of death-related discourses, symbolic representations, and changing attitudes over time. Key funerary indicators, such as graves and spatial distribution in the necropolis, inhumation type, body positioning and orientation, and grave goods, reveal the deceased's integration in their communities and socio-economic status. This paper explores these indicators to promote a broader understanding of communities' cultural, social, and economic contexts, focusing on the Portuguese Post-Medieval period (1450–1835) while

Resumo As práticas funerárias e as necrópoles fornecem informes sobre como as sociedades conceptualizam a morte, proporcionando, igualmente, uma perspetiva acerca dos contextos sociais, económicos e culturais das comunidades. A intersecção de dados arqueológicos, da história das mentalidades, de fontes iconográficas e documentais e da antropologia sociocultural, enriquece a compreensão dos discursos sobre a morte, das suas representações simbólicas e das atitudes ante a morte. Os indicadores funerários, como as sepulturas e a sua distribuição espacial, o tipo de inumação, a posição e orientação do corpo e o espólio votivo, revelam a integração do defunto na comunidade e o seu estatuto socioeconómico. O presente artigo aborda os indicadores supra-mencionados com o intuito de promover uma compreensão mais aprofundada dos contextos culturais, sociais e económicos das comuni-

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summarising key concepts. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of a multidisciplinary approach for a comprehensive interpretation of funerary practices. A detailed contextual analysis of skeletal remains, burial features, and associated material culture is essential to ensure reliable interpretations of funerary practices and social dynamics. Nevertheless, this approach requires the expertise of professionals with extensive field-work experience and specialised knowledge in archaeology, biological anthropology, and bioarchaeology.

Keywords: Funerary practices; bioarchaeology; social inequalities; post-medieval; Portugal.

Introduction

The analysis of funerary practices and burial contexts in necropolis excavations offers significant insights into how societies perceive death (Duday, 2009; Thevenet et al., 2014; Tillier et al., 2014; Bizot and Richier, 2023). Such analyses deepen our understanding of the discourses, representations, and shifts in attitudes toward death (Ariès, 1977; Vovelle, 1983; Stutz and Tarlow, 2013; Thevenet et al., 2014). They also provide a broader perspective on social, economic, and cultural contexts (Duday, 2009; Campos, 2019; Oliveira and Silva, 2021). The integration of archaeological data (e.g., Pearson, 2003; Cruz, 2011; Stutz and Tarlow, 2013), the history of mentalities (e.g., Ariès, 1977; Vovelle, 1983; Alexandre-

dades, centrado-se no período Pós-Medieval Português, entre 1450 e 1835. Destaca ainda a importância da multidisciplinaridade para uma interpretação holística das práticas funerárias. O estudo dos remanescentes esqueléticos, das características das inumações e da cultura material é essencial para garantir interpretações mais abrangentes das práticas funerárias e das dinâmicas sociais da comunidade. Todavia, esta investigação exige profissionais com vasta experiência de campo e conhecimento especializado em arqueologia, antropologia biológica e bioarqueologia.

Palavras-chave: Práticas funerárias; bioarqueologia; desigualdades sociais; pós-medieval; Portugal.

Bidon, 1993; 1998; Queiroz and Rugg, 2003), and socio-cultural anthropology (e.g., Van Gennep, 1981; Pina-Cabral, 1985; Huntington and Metcalf, 1991), along with written and iconographic sources, supports a holistic interpretation of funerary practices.

While death is universal, it is marked by diverse cultural and social processes that extend beyond biological death, leading to distinct responses across societies (Huntington and Metcalf, 1991; Rebay-Salisbury, 2012; Stutz and Tarlow, 2013; Thevenet et al., 2014; Campos, 2019; Oliveira and Silva, 2021) and historical periods (Pearson, 2003; Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Lopes, 2019). The reality of death shapes social practices and relationships, influences cultural structures,

and permeates all aspects of human existence (Huntington and Metcalf, 1991; Rebay-Salisbury, 2012; Stutz and Tarlow, 2013; Oliveira and Silva, 2021).

Necropolises and graves constitute material evidence of the deceased's integration in their communities, yielding an understanding of social, economic, and cultural contexts (Séguy and Signoli, 2008; Duday, 2009; Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Tillier et al., 2014; Campos, 2019; Bizot and Richier, 2023). The grave architecture, spatial distribution, type of inhumation, body positioning and orientation, and accompanying grave goods provide insights into symbolic meanings of death, funerary ideologies, collective representations of death, social dynamics, and the socioeconomic status of the deceased (Huntington and Metcalf, 1991; Duday, 2009; Araújo, 2010; Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Stutz and Tarlow, 2013; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015; Oliveira and Silva, 2021). In the absence of written records, graves provide essential evidence for interpreting the life and death of past populations (Duday, 2009).

This paper focuses on funerary indicators that reflect communities' cultural, social, and economic contexts, particularly during the Portuguese Post-Medieval period (1450–1835). It aims to summarise key concepts in funerary anthropology and emphasises the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to interpreting these practices. Furthermore, we highlighted that the paper is framed within a Christian context (Roman Catholic

Church), as it concerns Portuguese Post-Medieval Christian communities whose funerary practices reflect this religion's values, beliefs, and theological influences.

The following subsections explore key funerary indicators — such as spatial distribution, burial in coffins, the use of shrouds and lime, grave goods, body orientation and positioning, and primary and secondary inhumations and skeletal reductions — selected for their relevance in understanding Post-Medieval Portuguese funerary practices. These indicators have been systematically documented in Portuguese archaeological fieldwork, particularly since 1999, in accordance with Article 8 of Decree-Law No. 270/99, which requires teams to include specialists in biological anthropology and/or bioarchaeology. Additional aspects, such as the death of unbaptized children, body preparation, and funerary ceremonies for both the deceased and their community, are also addressed, based on historical and iconographic sources rather than archaeological excavations.

Spatial distribution

Burials in consecrated ground were required to guarantee the soul's salvation (Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Campos, 2019; Ginja, 2019). The choice of burial site reflected socioeconomic inequalities, with greater demand driving up costs. Wealthier individuals secured graves inside prestigious churches, often establishing family tombs. In contrast, lower-class individuals were typically

buried in churchyards, which are less prestigious locations because of their distance from the altar (Queiroz and Rugg, 2003; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015; Ginja, 2019; Lopes, 2019; Oliveira, 2019).

Churchyard burials often consigned individuals to anonymity, as these graves frequently lacked tombstones, resulting in a *damnatio memoriae* — the erasure of an individual's memory from collective consciousness (Vovelle, 1983; Ginja, 2019). However, even in churches, many graves bore no epitaphs, emphasising the priority of the soul's salvation over individual recognition (Rosa, 2010). In brief, despite the perception of death as a universal equaliser, funerary practices underscored ongoing social disparities, reflecting existing hierarchies even in death.

The preference for specific burial areas and differential funerary treatment based on age, especially for infants under one year old, has been documented across historical periods, including Post-Medieval Western Europe (e.g., Tillier and Duday, 1990; Alexandre-Bidon, 1998; Séguy and Signoli, 2008; Tzortzis and Séguy, 2008; Duday, 2009; Baills-Talbi, 2012) and Portugal (e.g., Cruz, 2011; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015; Curate et al., 2015). Infants were generally underrepresented in burials (Cardoso, 2003/2004; Séguy and Signoli, 2008; Duday, 2009; Baills-Talbi, 2012; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015). This underrepresentation may reflect inadequate fieldwork techniques and recovery procedures in the past (Cardoso, 2003/2004; Paredes, 2013), as well as a lack of interest

in children as subjects of study (Baxter, 2022). In such excavations, the limited attention given to infants often led to their exclusion from archaeological research. In recent years, however, theoretical and methodological advances have positioned infants as a significant focus within bioarchaeological research, demonstrating that they are far from archaeologically invisible (Paredes, 2013; Zuzarte, 2020; Baxter, 2022; Lourenço et al., 2025).

Accordingly, contemporary Portuguese excavations have shown a greater representation of infants in burial contexts. For instance, in the children's necropolis of São Domingos in Lisbon, 2798 individuals were recovered, ranging in age from 20 gestational weeks to 16 years (Lourenço et al., 2025). In Faro, an area adjacent to the Church of the Misericórdia was excavated, revealing infant — two months to three years old — burials that, when interpreted alongside historical documentation, were identified as newborns from the *Roda dos Expostos* (foundling wheel), a system for infants abandoned by their mothers and anonymously entrusted to the Misericórdia (Paredes, 2013). Many infant burials, particularly those under two years of age, were exhumed in the graveyard of the Church of Espírito Santo in Bucelas (Estêvão et al., 2020) and in the cemetery of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Salvação in Arruda-dos-Vinhos (Antunes-Ferreira et al., 2013).

Furthermore, some infant burials show evidence of careless deposition

(Cardoso, 2003/2004; Paredes, 2013; Curate et al., 2015), notably in the Ermida of Espírito Santo in Almada (Curate et al., 2015) and the Ermida of Nossa Senhora da Conceição in Seixal (Antunes-Ferreira and Ferreira, 2001). Similar examples were observed in extra-cemetery contexts in Lisbon: at Rua do Vale, five fetuses were hastily interred in a backyard, while at Rua Marquês de Angeja, a fetus was buried inside a pot (Antunes-Ferreira and Curate, 2024). While these practices may appear disconcerting from a contemporary perspective, they may have reflected the accepted norms of the period, particularly among lower socioeconomic groups. High infant mortality rates and pervasive poverty often contributed to emotional detachment among parents (Ariès, 1988; Séguy and Signoli, 2008).

Burials in coffins

The widespread use of coffins in Portugal began in the 16th and 17th centuries (Marques, 2010; Campos, 2019), but they were expensive and generally affordable only to wealthier individuals (Alexandre-Bidon, 1998; Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Campos, 2019; Lopes, 2019).

In the Portuguese archaeological record, coffin burials have been widely documented across the country, including in the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), the Ermida of Santo António in Monchique (Pires and Antunes-Ferreira, 2003), the Convent of Santana in Lisbon (Antunes-Ferreira, 2022), the crypt at the Palácio

dos Condes de Murça in Lisbon (Filipe et al., 2012), and the Convent of Santa Maria da Consolação in Oporto (Seabra, 2011), all associated with individuals of high socioeconomic status. Particularly noteworthy — given the rarity of coffin burials among non-adult individuals — are the necropolises of the Church of Santa Maria de Alcáçova in the Castle of Montemor-o-Velho (Silva and Imperial, 2019), Souto da Carpalhosa (Ginja, 2019), the Church of São Mamede in Travanca (Zuzarte, 2020), and the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015).

We highlight that taphonomic factors may have led to the destruction of coffins, leaving no visible traces at many archaeological sites. Only an archaeo- thanatological analysis of the human remains can confirm whether a coffin was used. Nonetheless, postmortem movements of body parts — typically associated with the voids created by coffins — are rarely documented (Duday, 2009; Tillier et al., 2014; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015).

The poorest individuals often relied on communitarian coffins provided by churches and confraternities. These coffins were used to transport the deceased to the necropolis. Upon arrival, the body was removed from the coffin and buried directly in the ground, after which the same coffin could be reused for subsequent burials (Pina-Cabral, 1985; Araújo, 2010; Howarth and Leaman, 2013).

More commonly, a bier carried the body from the home to the cemetery, exposing the deceased to public view

and allowing the community to witness their passing (Queiroz and Rugg, 2003; Campos, 2019; Oliveira, 2019). This practice is not documented archaeologically, but it is depicted in the panels of Setúbal's Church of São Julião and the Talhão of the Cemetery of Santa Casa da Misericórdia, illustrating 18th-century funeral processions in which the deceased were transported in an open coffin. Additionally, an article published in 1855 in the *O Setubalense* newspaper reported a procession in which a bier was used to carry the deceased to the cemetery.

Shroud

Shrouding the body was a common practice across Europe (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; Howarth and Leaman, 2013), including Portugal (Araújo, 2010; Marques, 2010; Cruz, 2011; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), and was observed among all social classes since the Middle Ages. The shroud, typically a white linen cloth — reminiscent of the fabric associated with Christ's shroud — was closely fitted around the deceased (Howarth and Leaman, 2013). After washing the body, the family or caregivers dressed the deceased in ordinary clothing or, in some instances, in the religious habit of their congregation (Marques, 2010; Oliveira, 2019). Garcia de Resende's description (1596) of King João II of Portugal's burial exemplifies these practices:

"He remained lying dead with his face uncovered for more than an hour until he was completely cold, while they prepared and shrouded him very neatly" (...). "At mid-

night, the king's body was carried in a tomb covered with black velvet, with a white damask cross on top, placed on a litter draped with a large black velvet curtain (...)"(Resende, 1596: 78–79).

Children and unmarried women often wore white garments symbolising innocence and purity, sometimes adorned. In contrast, impoverished individuals and children were frequently shrouded without clothing (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993). Ribbons tied the hands and feet, keeping the body in position, while pins fastened the shroud (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015).

In the Portuguese archaeological record, evidence attests to this practice, particularly through the presence of shroud pins around skeletonized remains and, more rarely, remnants of the shrouds themselves (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015). Such evidence were observed in the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), the Convent of Santana in Lisbon (Antunes-Ferreira, 2022), the Convent of Jesus in Setúbal (Antunes-Ferreira and Cândido, 2017), the Recolhimento of Nossa Senhora da Soledade in Setúbal (Neto and Antunes-Ferreira, 2012), the Convent of Santa Maria da Consolação in Oporto (Seabra, 2011), the graveyard of the Church of Santa Maria de Alcáçova in the Castle of Montemor-o-Velho (Silva and Imperial, 2019), and the Convent of Nossa Senhora do Carmo in Lisbon (Benisse, 2005). Interestingly, at the cemetery of the Military Hospital at São Jorge Castle

in Lisbon, the bedsheets of infected patients were reportedly used as shrouds to avoid waste (Henriques et al., 2020), highlighting the value of documentary sources in complementing archaeological interpretations of funerary practices.

Lime

The use of lime became widespread from the Middle Ages onward. Its purposes were to mask the odour of decomposition, accelerate bodily decay, and mitigate health risks associated with miasmas (Weiss-Krejci, 2011; Bianucci et al., 2013). Garcia de Resende (1596: 80) described this practice regarding King João II of Portugal's body: "(...) *they placed three baskets of lime inside the coffin so that it would be consumed more quickly (...)*".

The miasma theory, rooted in Hippocratic principles, dominated explanations of disease transmission from the Middle Ages through the 19th-century. It posited that diseases spread through contaminated air — miasmas — arising from decaying organic matter, polluted water, and waste. These miasmas were identified by their invisible, odorous pestilential vapours (Ariès, 1977; Queiroz and Rugg, 2003; Weiss-Krejci, 2011).

In the Portuguese archaeological record, lime use is extensively documented in Post-Medieval necropolises. Examples include the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), the Convent of Santana in Lisbon (Antunes-Ferreira, 2022), the Convent of Santa Maria da Consolação in Oporto

(Seabra, 2011), and the crypt at the Palácio dos Condes de Murça in Lisbon (Filipe et al., 2012). Interestingly, Seabra (2011) and Antunes-Ferreira (2015) noted differences in the treatment of the deceased between crypts and cloisters: all crypt burials contained lime, whereas only a few cloister burials did. The explanation for these differences may lie in the fact that accelerating the decomposition of corpses in confined spaces was necessary, as such areas were thought to concentrate pestilential odours (miasmas) believed to transmit disease. Indeed, Ariès (1977) reports multiple fatalities among gravediggers exposed to the intense stench of corpses in such conditions. Unexpectedly, in the cemetery of the Military Hospital at São Jorge Castle in Lisbon, no evidence of lime use has been recorded, despite the burial of infectious patients (Henriques et al., 2020).

Grave goods

Grave goods provide significant insights into societal attitudes toward death (Pearson, 2003; Weiss-Krejci, 2011; Howarth and Leaman, 2013) and may reveal the cultural, social, and economic frameworks of past communities (Pearson, 2003; Rebay-Salisbury, 2012; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015). The family offered these objects to assist the deceased's transition into the afterlife and to prevent their return to the world of the living, emphasizing the ritual significance of burial (Van Gennepe, 1981; Pearson, 2003; Thevenet et al., 2014).

In Post-Medieval Portugal, votive objects encompassed religious items such as medals (associated with saintly protection), crucifixes, rosaries, reliquary boxes, scapulars, and even amulets, and their presence is frequently identified in the archaeological record (Cruz, 2011; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015; Costa, 2022).

Medieval burials commonly contained coins, but these became rare during the Post-Medieval period (Barroca, 1987; Antunes-Ferreira and Curate, 2024). Nonetheless, Barroca (1987) highlights that the tradition of Charon's obol persisted in certain contemporary practices in northern Portugal. For instance, coins were recovered in association with non-adult and adult individual burials in the necropolis of Souto de Carpalhosa in Leiria (Ginja, 2019), in an adolescent from the graveyard of the Church of Espírito Santo in Bucelas (Estêvão et al., 2020), in adults from the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), and non-adults and adults in the cemetery of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Salvação in Arruda-dos-Vinhos (Antunes-Ferreira et al., 2013).

Christian beliefs in humility and the renunciation of material possessions as virtues for gaining entry to Paradise influenced the inclusion of grave goods. Even wealthier individuals often embraced simplicity, with some requesting burial in a religious habit or opting for churchyard interment as a gesture of modesty (Vovelle, 1983; Araújo, 2010; Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015).

An example of this practice is the burial of the nobleman D. Luís Castro do Rio in the central crypt of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), who requested to be dressed in the habit of Franciscan friars (Piedade, 1728).

Body position in Christian burials

The placement of the deceased in Christian burials is typically supine, with origins in Roman traditions (Ariès, 1977; Tardieu, 1993). In this position, the face looking toward Heaven symbolises spiritual elevation (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; Tardieu, 1993). In contrast, fetal and prone placements were rare and often associated with marginalised groups, such as individuals with physical deformities, mental illnesses, or infectious diseases (e.g., leprosy, tuberculosis). Hunchbacks, for instance, were sometimes buried in lateral or prone positions (Tsaliki, 2008). Burials of condemned criminals, suicides, prisoners, enslaved people, or those accused of witchcraft may also display these positions (Gonçalves and Santos, 2005; Tsaliki, 2008). An example is provided by the enslaved Africans from Valle da Gafaria in Lagos, who were deposited in prone and fetal burial positions and discarded in an urban waste dump (Ferreira et al., 2019), reflecting their marginalisation and dehumanisation even in death. Similarly, the deceased in Évora Prison during the Inquisition were displayed in prone, supine, and lateral positions and discarded like waste into a dump (Magalhães et al., 2015).

The positioning of the arms showed significant variability. Pearson (2003) proposes that these differences may reflect distinctions between groups in the cemetery. However, no archaeological or iconographic evidence indicates chronological changes in arm placement, suggesting that these variations may have symbolic or moral interpretations instead (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; Tardieu, 1993; Xavier, 2001). In Post-Medieval Portuguese burials, the arms typically rested alongside the body or were placed on the lower abdomen area (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), possibly symbolising modesty or humility before the Creator (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993), as also depicted in funerary statuary (Xavier, 2001). Less frequently, the arms were crossed over the chest or arranged in a prayer position, as observed, for instance, in some burials in the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), the Convent of Jesus in Setúbal (Antunes-Ferreira and Cândido, 2017), and the crypts of the Palácio dos Condes de Murça (Filipe et al., 2012). Remarkably, in two women's burials from the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), rope remnants were identified around the wrists, likely used to maintain the hands in that position. The difficulty of maintaining a prayer posture may have contributed to variations, while the symbolism could reflect fear or resignation (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993). A right hand near the chest might represent a gesture of blessing, suggesting that the de-

ceased could cross themselves on Judgment Day (Cruz, 2011). In children's burials, arms were often placed on the lower abdomen or extended, hands joined (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; Tardieu, 1993), as was also observed in the infant burials from the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), in the graveyard of the Church of Espírito Santo in Bucelas (Estêvão et al., 2020), and those from the cemetery of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Salvação in Arruda-dos-Vinhos (Antunes-Ferreira et al., 2013).

In Sobral de Monte Agraço and Arruda-dos-Vinhos, the deceased's marital status has influenced burial arm positioning since the late 19th-century, with possible earlier roots (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015). Ethnographic interviews conducted by the author with the long-term inhabitants of Arruda dos Vinhos documented these customs. However, these traditions are gradually fading as the influence of funeral agencies grows, which often overlook such customs. Guilherme Cardoso, an archaeologist with extensive experience in the region, supported these observations, noting similar practices in the neighbouring locality of Sobral de Monte Agraço. Unmarried individuals were buried with their hands together on their chests, resembling a prayer posture. Widowed individuals had their hands crossed over their chests, symbolizing unity and companionship in death. Finally, married individuals were buried with the right hand on the chest and the left arm extended alongside

the body, awaiting their companion. In summary, these local funerary practices reflect a nuanced cultural expression of identity and social status in death.

The lower limbs were generally extended, with rare deviations (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; 1998; Tardieu, 1993), a pattern widely observed across all age groups in Post-Medieval Portuguese burials (Cruz, 2011).

Body orientation

In churches, burials followed a structured arrangement, with most individuals oriented toward the main altar. This orientation aligns with traditional architecture, in which the altar typically faces east (toward the sunrise) and the main entrance faces west (toward the sunset) (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993; Mattoso, 1997). However, in practice, many religious buildings deviate from this canonical alignment.

The standard burial orientation in churchyards was also East-West, with the deceased's head facing east, symbolising the journey toward Heavenly Jerusalem, a practice established by the 5th-century (Mattoso, 1997). Deviations from this standard orientation were uncommon. Painted crosses were placed on the coffin or shroud to mark the head's position, ensuring proper alignment during burial (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993). However, in Post-Medieval Portugal, burials exhibited various orientations, although an east-west alignment predominated. Burial in a consecrated place appears to have been valued more highly than strict

adherence to orientation, as observed in the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015) and in the Convent of Jesus (Antunes-Ferreira and Cândido, 2017). Conversely, in the Church of Santa Maria de Alcáçova in Castelo de Montemor-o-Velho (Silva and Imperial, 2019) and the Church of Nossa Senhora da Anunciada in Setúbal (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015), burials display varying orientations, likely reflecting the need to optimise available space.

Primary and secondary burials and reductions

Post-Medieval Portuguese burial practices included primary inhumations, secondary inhumations, and skeletal reductions, regardless of social hierarchy (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015). Primary inhumations involve the direct placement of the body in a permanent grave, whereas secondary inhumations involve an initial temporary grave followed by the transfer of skeletal remains to a final burial site (Tillier et al., 2014; Neves, 2019). Reductions refer to rearranging disarticulated bones within the original grave (Duday, 2009; Neves, 2019).

Archaeological and archaeoethanological interpretations propose that secondary inhumations and reductions were practical strategies for managing limited burial space in the necropolis (Cruz, 2011; Seabra, 2011; Antunes-Ferreira, 2015). Consequently, earlier interred individuals were removed or relocated in the grave to make room for a new burial. These fu-

nerary treatments are widely documented in Portugal, with frequent skeletal reductions in reused individual graves and secondary inhumations (ossuaries). In the crypts of the Chapel of Espírito Santo in Loures (Antunes-Ferreira, 2015) and the crypt of the Palácio dos Condes de Murça in Lisbon (Filipe et al., 2012), bones from earlier inhumations were moved to a corner to make space for new burials. At the necropolis of the Church of Espírito Santo in Bucelas (Estêvão et al., 2020), skeletal reductions occurred in almost all individual graves, and two partially excavated ossuaries contained at least 352 individuals. At the Convent of Santa Maria da Consolação in Oporto, 16 ossuaries were recovered alongside primary inhumations (Seabra, 2011), while in the Church of São Mamede of Travanca, 47 ossuaries were recorded in addition to primary inhumations (Zuzarte, 2020).

An alternative interpretation, based on Pina-Cabral (1985), suggests that skeletal disarticulation and the relocation of bones within graves or ossuaries may have served as final separation rites, permanently detaching the deceased from the living. He documented post-burial practices in which bones were cleaned and placed in ossuaries to create space for other family members. Interestingly, these practices sometimes occurred even when no new deaths were expected, proposing that the procedure signified the complete separation of the deceased from the living. This process marked the end of the liminal phase, during which the family

would verify whether the body had decomposed. In this context, burial represents a transitional phase in handling human remains. Families' focus on the grave diminishes after this phase, although rituals performed on All Saints' Day (*Todos-os-Santos*) and All Souls' Day (*Finados*) continue until the memory of the deceased fades. Notably, these rituals primarily target the most recently deceased but often extend to include older burials in the same grave (Pina-Cabral, 1985).

Such practices also raise questions about their theological implications. They contrast with the Christian ideal of bodily preservation until resurrection, inviting reflection on the relationship between doctrine and practice. The resurrection of the body is a central tenet of Christian doctrine, prescribing that it remains intact until the Final Judgment Day.

Nevertheless, archaeological evidence from Post-Medieval Christian necropolises indicates that skeletal reduction and secondary inhumation were typical, apparently contradicting this principle. Although no studies have yet addressed this contradiction, it suggests a degree of flexibility between doctrine and funerary practice. Indeed, a similar tension persists today, as cremation becomes increasingly widespread among Christians. Thus, the *Dicastero per la Dottrina della Fede* (2016) acknowledges that such flexibility has long existed within theological interpretation, affirming that God can recreate or transform the body at resurrection. It further reaffirms that,

while the human body possesses intrinsic dignity and should be interred in a sacred place, material integrity is not strictly required for resurrection.

Beyond the grave and funerary practices Unbaptized children's death

In the Post-Medieval period, the treatment of unbaptized children's deaths, including the preparation of their bodies and the associated ritual ceremonies, was deeply influenced by cultural and religious beliefs (Ariès, 1988; Pearson, 2003; Campos, 2019). Identifying these practices in the archaeological data poses challenges, but historical records, iconographic sources, and contemporary studies on death provide a better understanding.

Baptism was a pivotal rite that granted societal status to a newborn (Howarth and Leaman, 2013; Almeida, 2015; Campos, 2019). Before baptism, children existed in a liminal state, devoid of a name and social identity, which rendered their existence fragile and precarious (Van Gennep, 1981; Séguy and Signoli, 2008; Howarth and Leaman, 2013). If a child died unbaptized, their absence of social identity prevented their inclusion in both the worlds of the living and the dead. As a result, they were often denied burial in consecrated ground and excluded from Paradise (Alexandre-Bidon, 1998; Séguy and Signoli, 2008; Almeida, 2015; Campos, 2019).

Therefore, unbaptized infants were often buried discreetly, either in family homes or churchyards, reflecting parental anxiety regarding their children's spiri-

tual fate (Pearson, 2003; Baills-Talbi, 2012; Almeida, 2015). Parents feared that these infants, having been excluded from both living and dead worlds, might return as vengeful spirits (Almeida, 2015). This fear emphasized the urgency of baptizing newborns immediately after birth to ensure their spiritual salvation and integration into the Christian community (Tzortzis and Séguy, 2008; Almeida, 2015; Campos, 2019).

For unbaptized children, the theological concept of Limbo emerged — a neutral, eternal state separating them from Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory (Alexandre-Bidon, 1998; Almeida, 2015). Although Limbo was never formally codified in Catholic doctrine, it provided a framework for explaining the fate of these souls. The concept persisted until the International Theological Commission abolished it in 2007 (International Theological Commission, 2007).

Preparation and rituals for the deceased

The preparation of the deceased's body involved a symbolic process that included washing, anointing, and dressing. This ritual served as a purification rite, representing readiness for the afterlife (Van Gennep, 1981; Pina-Cabral, 1985; Araújo, 2010; Rebay-Salisbury, 2012). Wrapping the deceased in a shroud was an essential separation ritual, marking their transition and preparing them for the journey (Howarth and Leaman, 2013). Neglecting these rites was believed to risk leaving the soul trapped

between worlds, unable to find peace (Thevenet et al., 2014).

After preparing the body, the wake was held at home or at the church. During the wake, the coffin and the deceased were sprinkled with holy water to ward off malevolent spirits (Pina-Cabral, 1985). A lit candle, symbolising *lux perpetua* (eternal light), was placed nearby as a spiritual beacon (Vovelle, 1983).

The funeral procession, with the deceased carried in a coffin or bier, marked the public acknowledgement of the loss and allowed the community to mourn together. This spiritual and social ritual emphasised the collective farewell (Ariès, 1977; Queiroz and Rugg, 2003; Araújo, 2010).

Symbolism in funerary practices

Tile panels in Setúbal's Church of São Julião and the Talhão of the Cemetery of Santa Casa da Misericórdia illustrate 18th-century burial practices: the funeral procession transported the deceased in an open coffin to the church, displayed the body in a chapel, wrapped it in a shroud, and then carried it to the cemetery. Burials often involved the reuse of graves, as evidenced by the visible bones alongside fresh soil in the tile panel from the *Talhão* of the Cemetery of Santa Casa da Misericórdia.

The act of placing the deceased in a coffin represented their separation from home and marked the beginning of their journey to the afterlife. Funerary rites, such as sprinkling soil onto graves, symbolise the transition from the world

of the living to the world of the dead, signalling the end of the separation process (Pina-Cabral, 1985; Rebay-Salisbury, 2012). Consequently, the grave became a place of incorporation, integrating the deceased into the world of the dead (Van Gennep, 1981). In short, these rituals served to navigate the liminal phase of death, providing comfort to the community while ensuring a proper transition for the deceased to the afterlife.

In contemporary Western society, a waiting period of at least 24 hours must pass before burial, as stipulated, for instance, by Portugal's Decree-Law 411/98, which specifies a minimum of 24 hours before either burial or cremation. In contrast, during the Post-Medieval period, it could occur as little as a few hours after death (Vovelle, 1983; Lopes, 2019). Thus, the time allocated for funerary rites, marked by the presence of the deceased or the coffin in the home or church (Van Gennep, 1981), was extremely brief. However, in some parts of Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, widespread superstitions led to burials often being delayed until the first signs of decomposition appeared, driven by the fear of premature burial (Vovelle, 1983).

Dying "well" is not solely an individual action; it requires collaboration from family and community (Pina-Cabral, 1985). The journey and integration of the deceased into the world of the dead involve a set of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1981), and it is the responsibility of the living to assist the deceased during this journey (Pina-

Cabral, 1985; Lopes, 2019). For instance, the *Defuntos e Sufrágios Ordem 3ª do Carmo* manuscript from 1771, discovered in the archives of the Convent of Carmo of Setúbal, along with the *Espelho de Penitentes e Chronica da Provincia de Santa Maria da Arrábida* (Piedade, 1728), describe the required number and frequency of masses for deceased members. If the ceremonial and ritual requirements were fulfilled appropriately — rites of separation from the world of the living and incorporation into the world of the dead — death was not problematic (Pina-Cabral, 1985; Thevenet et al., 2014). However, neglecting these ceremonies and rituals could prevent the deceased's soul from separating from the world of the living (Pina-Cabral, 1985; Mattoso, 1997; Pearson, 2003; Campos, 2019). This situation became problematic, as such souls would be condemned to wander between both worlds — unable to find peace in the afterlife while still being tied to the living (Van Gennep, 1981; Pina-Cabral, 1985; Mattoso, 1997). Such restless spirits or ghosts might seek vengeance and torment the living (Pina-Cabral, 1985; Mattoso, 1997). Hence, these rites facilitated the soul's journey toward salvation and served a protective and practical function for the living (Van Gennep, 1981; Pina-Cabral, 1985).

Ariès (1977) and Vovelle (1983) noted a profound shift in attitudes toward death from the 19th-century onward. Death became less familiar and closer and more threatening. Ariès (1977) described it as “wild,” with the death and the deceased

viewed as objects of fear and repulsion. Although the “domesticated” death of the Medieval period through the 19th-century was also fraught with fear, it was simultaneously accepted and ritualised, fostering a degree of familiarity and public acknowledgement of death. Enlightenment-era hygienist theories, emerging around 1740, catalysed this change in mentalities. These theories criticised the traditional proximity between the living and the dead, especially targeting the practice of burying the dead in churches and churchyards (Ariès, 1977; Vovelle, 1983; Queiroz and Rugg, 2003; Campos, 2019).

The 19th-century Liberal reforms in Portugal marked a pivotal turning point for public health and hygiene, leading to measures such as the establishment of cemeteries and the banning of church burials (Queiroz and Rugg, 2003). Despite facing significant popular resistance, the government enforced these changes through key decrees issued in 1835 by Rodrigo da Fonseca Magalhães and later in 1844 and 1845 by António Bernardo Costa Cabral (Mattoso, 1997; Queiroz and Rugg, 2003). An article published in the *O Setubalense* local newspaper in 1855 clearly illustrates this transformation in attitude, criticizing the funeral customs of confraternities and brotherhoods. The report described a “barbaric” practice in which the deceased was publicly displayed during transportation to the cemetery:

“Mais Falta de Policia: Há nesta villa e entre algumas Irmandades o costume

barbaro de, quando conduzem á sepultura os seus confrades, levarem sobre o esquite como em charola o cadaver descoberto e exposto ao publico, atravessando assim a Povoação, e apresentando-lhe este espectáculo hediondo pela repugnancia que nos causa a sua vista, lugubre pelo horror de que nos sentimos possuidos ao contemplar o nosso semelhante já tornado cadaver, e irreligioso pelo pouco respeito e menos resguardo aos mortos (...)" (O Setubalense, 1855: 3).

The newspaper described the practice of parading the deceased through town as ghastly, gloomy, and irreverent. This portrayal highlights a growing societal disdain for public displays of the deceased, which evokes feelings of disgust and horror among onlookers. In summary, the changes in mentalities about death mark the advent of contemporary funerary practices prioritizing hygiene and showing profound respect for the deceased. It reflects a broader movement in Portuguese society to separate death from public life, encapsulating the new cultural paradigms toward mortality that defined the era.

Final remarks

A comprehensive understanding of funerary practices requires careful contextualization of skeletal remains, burial features, and associated material culture, which must be meticulously documented during excavations. This approach is essential to ensure reliable interpretations of funerary practices. Therefore, it is

paramount that fieldwork must be methodically planned and conducted by professionals with extensive knowledge and expertise in archaeology, biological anthropology, and bioarchaeology.

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