

## RESEARCH UPDATE

## Bones on Stones

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An interest in, and fascination with bones has a very long history, perhaps because in them resides the last tangible evidence of individual existence (Bahn 1984). The wish to have one's bones buried either close to those of a loved one, or if not that, then in one's own country, for example, can be traced back at least as far as the *Iliad* and the Trojan War; '... inter my bones not far from thine ...' urges the ghost of Patroclus to Achilles while Nector suggests to Atreides that '... the friends of the dead ... bring their bones home to their children ...' (Homer 1987: 23.86).<sup>1</sup>

By none was the desire for the return of one's bones to home soil expressed more fervently than by those who died during the Crusades (Park 1995) although the practice predated them having earlier been followed on behalf of others who had died far from home, especially by the Germans who died in foreign lands, and later by the French and the English.<sup>2</sup> Following their death in the Holy Land, the bodies of the rich and the nobility might be boiled and the flesh removed so that their bones could be taken back for burial by the survivors. This practice was condemned by the Church and it was eventually forbidden by Pope Boniface VIII in the bull *Detestande feritatis* issued on 27 September 1299 (Brown 1981). In its place Boniface decreed that all those who died in a foreign catholic country should be immediately buried at the site chosen by the deceased, or,

failing that, temporarily buried at or near the place of death and transferred to the final place selected for burial only after the body had turned to ashes, a process that might be long delayed (Brown 1981).<sup>3</sup>

During the medieval period, a rather more macabre interest in the skeleton was displayed by artists depicting *memento mori* such as the 'Three Quick and the Three Dead', the *dance macabre*, and skeletons with a caption taking a form such as: 'As you were, so was I, and as I am, so shall you be' (Willeumier-Schalij 1953).<sup>4</sup>

In depictions of the 'Three Quick and the Three Dead', three richly dressed princes or noble-men are seen riding to the hunt only to be greeted by themselves as skeletons; as we are, so shall you be ... The lesson of all the various forms of *memento mori* was presumably to focus the medieval mind on the vainglorious of earthly life and, in their place, prepare people for the rewards that will hopefully come in the life hereafter. Many illustrations of this kind are to be found in churches and cathedrals throughout Europe and it is often said that this art form was particularly stimulated by the coming of the Black Death which was certainly enough to remind one that life was indeed transitory and uncertain.<sup>5</sup> Another popular image, the *danse macabre* or dance of death first appeared in the Cimetière des Innocents in Paris in 1424 and quickly spread throughout the rest of Europe. In these pictures, death is shown as a skeleton, sometimes wearing a crown on his head – King Death who triumphs over all – inviting people of all kinds to a dance that leads inevitably to the grave;

again the intention seems to be to act as a reminder of the closeness of death and the necessity to be prepared for it at all times (Clark 1950).

The artists who created the various forms of *memento mori* referred to above, clearly had some knowledge of the anatomy of the human skeleton even if they are rarely accurate as to detail.<sup>6</sup> Although the dance of death persisted in some parts of Europe into the nineteenth century, most of these art forms had disappeared by the early modern period, but at the turn of the seventeenth century and into the early part of the nineteenth, human bones came to be incorporated on grave stones taking the place of the otherwise overly comfortable or sentimental and highly coloured images that were then the norm, and amongst which, cherubs were the dominant form (Burgess 1963). The fashion for skulls succeeded the cherubs and was most commonly followed in East Anglia, although scattered examples can be found in some other parts of the United Kingdom – Scotland, for example (Christison 1901; Graham 1957; Tarlow 1999) – and also, at

roughly the same time in New England, USA (Welch 1983).

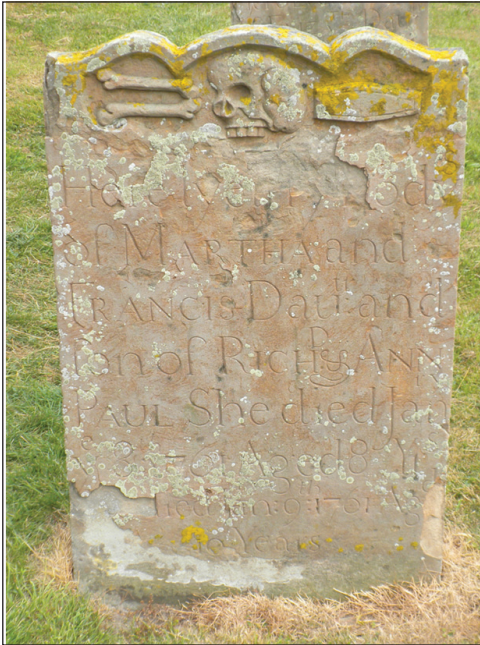
The earliest representations of the skull from the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were often crude, even simplistic, especially in Scotland and in some of the New England examples. The early 18<sup>th</sup> century East Anglian examples show the skull in an almost three dimensional aspect, with a frontal and a lateral view combined (**Fig. 1**). There are many variations, however. Thus, the skull may be shown face-on wearing a crown or a laurel wreath (**Fig. 2**) – a throwback to the Dance of Death, perhaps? – or with limb bones, crossed or uncrossed (**Fig. 3**). Or there may be other intimations of death, an hourglass, or a coffin, for example, (**Fig. 3**) and sometimes a variety of emblems on the same stone. **Fig. 4** shows one such example, with a skull, cross-bones, an hourglass, and crossed scythes and shovels, presumably representing death and burial; and squeezed in above are two cherubs, thus combining the two intimations of mortality, hope and despair. The variety of forms is such that although many of the grave stones show similarities, almost no two grave stones are



**Figure 1:** Tombstone showing partial frontal and side view of skull. St Margaret's Church, Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk (Photo Author).



**Figure 2:** Skull wearing a laurel wreath: Death the victor. St Margaret's Church, Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk (Photo Author).



**Figure 3:** Skull with unidentifiable limb bones and a coffin. All Saints Church, Cottenham, Cambridgeshire (Photo Author).



**Figure 4:** Tombstone with skull, hourglass, crossed scythes and shovels, topped with two cherubs, not looking entirely happy. All Saints Church, Cottenham, Cambridgeshire (Photo Author).

exactly the same and there is no evidence of any progression of style as there is with some of the New England examples. Here, interestingly, cherubs succeed skulls rather than the other way round as in the East Anglian cemeteries (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966: 504). Furthermore none of the bones is anatomically accurate. The skulls are readily and easily recognisable suggesting that the masons who carved the stones had probably seen examples at some time or another, but the long bones are not at all recognisable and their pattern may have owed more to the butcher's shop than to any actual anatomical example. These simplistic representations stand in stark contrast to some of the elaborate monuments found within churches where both skull and long bones are shown in exact detail. In some cases it is possible to see that the complex anatomy of the orbit (eye socket) is absolutely accurate and so is the detail of the long bones, suggesting that the sculptors of these – obviously much more expensive monuments – had a very detailed knowledge of anatomy, and had probably attended anatomy demonstrations, or at least had access to books with accurate illustrations (see **Fig. 5**, for example). The anatomical schools of the 18th century were attended by many lay people, including artists, and the Royal Academy of Arts ran its own anatomy lessons allowing



**Figure 5:** Detail from a memorial in St Mary's Church, Walthamstow, Essex. Showing exact anatomical detail of the skull and both femurs (Photo Author).

art students to have a thorough knowledge of the human body (Daelington 1990).

The skulls on the grave stones of East Anglia disappeared as abruptly as they appeared, to be succeeded by the saccharine memorials that characterised the Victorian era where almost no-one died, but was 'sleeping', 'gone before', or 'resting in Christ's arms'; death seemed not to be an option in those optimistic times – by the well-to-do, at least (Clegg 1984). Sentimentality – sometimes to the point of mawkishness – was especially noticeable in the gravestones of children (Haveman 1999).

It is far from clear why the fashion for skulls on gravestones suddenly arose in the eighteenth century. The skull had been associated with death for centuries: Christ was crucified at the place of the skull (Golgotha or Calvary) and the skull appears in many depictions of the Crucifixion as both identifier of place and symbol of death. But what prompted the sudden appearance on gravestones, and in several parts of the world simultaneously? Was it a whim on the part of the masons, to increase trade, or had there been a change in the public mood? Dethlefsen and Deetz (1966: 508) put the change from skulls to cherubs in New England down to the relative decline in Puritanism but there is no obvious change to a more severe form of religion in Britain that might account for the appearance of skulls. The cemetery and its monuments reveals much about death, but also much about life (Ames 1981) and the complexity underlying the symbolism is difficult to untangle. Hijjiya (1983: 339–340) notes that artisans, unlike artists, never explain their commodity, and leave no explanation as to why they carved a particular gravestone. Their motivation is money, and by providing customers with as wide a choice as possible, or by introducing a new range of products, they may be protecting and promoting their livelihood.

At present, the search for other examples of bones on stones is continuing, as is the hunt for pattern books that masons might

have produced, and from which the mourning families could choose the memorial for their deceased relatives. It is hoped that more can be learned of the means by which the masons obtained their rudimentary anatomical knowledge.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Iliad*, vii, 334 – 5. This passage has proved problematic to Greek scholars, not least since it was the general custom for the Greeks to cremate their dead. See Shive (1996).

<sup>2</sup> But not, apparently by the Italians, who were amazed by what they referred to as the *mos teutonicus* (the German custom). Further details can be found in Park (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Boniface reissued the bull on 18 February 1300 and this explains the confusion in much of the literature where either date may be quoted for its origin (Brown, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Similar inscriptions may sometimes also be found on graves or grave stones, sometimes in the form of Latin tags such as *Tu fui, ego eris* (What you are, I was, what I am you will be), or *Eram quod es, eris quod sum* (I was what you are, you will be what I am).

<sup>5</sup> That the *memento mori* were stimulated by the Black Death is by no means held by all authorities; for a contrary view, see Lerner (2008). An even starker reminder of the transitory nature of life appeared in the later fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the transi tomb in which the dead person was shown above as he or she was during life, and below as a corpse in varying stages of decomposition and decay, sometimes shrouded and with maggots or worms making a meal of the body. These tombs first appeared in France from where they spread to northern Europe and many examples

still survive. They spread to England in the fifteenth century, the first being that of Bishop Richard Fleming in Lincoln Cathedral (Cohen, 1973).

- <sup>6</sup> The relative crudeness of some of the anatomical drawing in the early modern period can be seen in some of the illustrations for Francis Quarles's *Emblems and hieroglyphics of the life of man* first published in 1637. Two skeletons are shown, one in the eighth emblem of Book 5 (Man is Death's prisoner) and the other, the sixth in Book 6 (Angels our guard). Although the illustrations are correct in so far as the number of arm and leg bones is concerned, the number of ribs is incorrect and none of the bones is true to shape. Doubtless anatomical veracity was not the main factor in the construction of these figures but they stand in very sharp contrast to the beautiful wood-cuts of Calcar which illustrated Vesalius's *De fabrica* published almost a century earlier in 1543.

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