"The Sting of Bitter Grief": Child Loss in the Middle Ages

Isabella Double
Smith College

In the earliest days of the Black Death, Joan, daughter of Edward III of England, died in Bordeaux while en route to Castile for her marriage. Edward wrote to the father of Joan's intended husband, informing him with "intense bitterness of heart," of what had occurred.[1] He told him, "no fellow human being could be surprised if we were inwardly desolated by the sting of this bitter grief, for we are human too," before expressing gratitude that God had called her to heaven.[2] Edward's letter articulates an important dichotomy between inner feeling and outward expression which pervades sources discussing medieval child death.

Some have taken the differences in how bereaved parents in the Middle Ages mourned to mean that they did not feel interior grief, but modern scholars tend to disagree. Outward protestations of stoicism and acceptance of God's will belied the development of various rituals and practices that sought to honor deceased children. People looked beyond the religious practices sanctioned by the Church and made efforts to baptize dead babies and bury infants and children in exceptional ways. Furthermore, records from the time show a tension between idealized reactions and the more complicated reality.

The popularity of the argument that the death of a child was unremarkable to medieval parents stems largely from one man: Philippe Ariès. Despite his influence on the study of history, Ariès was not himself a career historian and received no institutional recognition until he was sixty-four years old.[3] He referred to himself as a "historien du dimanche," or Sunday historian, indicating the somewhat

[1] Thomas Rymer, ed., *Foedera, Conventiones, Litterae, et cujuscunque generis acta publica* III, 20 vols (London: 1704–35), 39–40, quoted in Rosemary Horrox, ed., *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 250.
[2] Rymer, *Foedera, Conventiones, Litterae,* 39–40, quoted in Horrox, *The Black Death*, 250.
[3] Guillaume Gros, "Philippe Ariès, entre traditionalisme et mentalités: Itinéraire d'un précurseur," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 90, no. 2 (2006): 121, https://doi.org/10.3917/ving.090.0121.

casual and amateurish nature of his historical study.[4] Ariès was involved with the *mentalités* school of history, which gained popularity during the twentieth century. He believed that historical societies should be studied with an anthropological approach like the study of a foreign culture, rather than through the traditional framework of important events and grand movements.[5]

When *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, which had been released in France to marginal success, was translated into English in 1962 under the title of *Centuries of Childhood*, it was met with immediate acclaim.[6] The historical interpretation that it offered felt new and revolutionary, perfect for an era in which the social sciences were undergoing rapid change.

Ariès stated openly in his introduction that he was not a specialist in the *ancien régime*, but rather a demographic historian who wanted to examine the origins of the modern family unit.[7] He sought to identify the evolution of the conception of childhood, and came to the conclusion that it did not exist until roughly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[8] Based on that supposition, Ariès argued that in the Middle Ages, the death of a child was hardly an event of note, even to the child's parents. He viewed apathy as a survival mechanism rather than a moral failing because "people could not allow themselves to become too attached to something that was regarded as a probable loss."[9]

Ariès' methodology has faced criticism over its lack of depth. He based his assertions of medieval perceptions of children on the study of premodern pictorial evidence, which treated all art as "unmediated representations of the perceptual categories of their periods," rather than acknowledging any potential for figurative or metaphorical elements.[10] The narrow scope of the sources that he chose to reference inherently limited his capacity to analyze shifting attitudes. For example, he looked to the rise of portraiture that depicts children in the seventeenth century and claimed that it indicated that "the common conscience had discovered that the child's soul too was immortal,"[11] but further research reveals that assertion as simply untrue. Furthermore, he neglects to analyze attitudes towards children beyond recognizing that they are sometimes different to our own.[12]

The idea that medieval parents did not care for their children has been described as "untenable" in light of modern research that interrogates medieval conceptions of emotion more

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[4] Jeroen J.H. Dekker and Leendert F. Groenendijk, "Philippe Ariès's Discovery of Childhood after Fifty Years: The Impact of a Classic Study on Educational Research," *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 2 (2012): 134.

[5] Gros, "Entre traditionalisme et mentalités," 132.

[6] Gros, "Entre traditionalisme et mentalités," 133.

[7] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 9.

[8] Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 43.

[9] Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 38.

[10] Adrian Wilson, "The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès," History and Theory 19, no. 2 (1980): 146, https://doi.org/10.2307/2504795.

[11] Ariès, Centuries of Childhood, 43.

[12] Wilson, "An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès," 138.

thoroughly.[13] In an interview a few years before his death, Ariès said that he wished that he had learned more about the Middle Ages and "refusait d'accepter l'idée qu'il aurait soutenu que l'enfant ait été traité par les adultes comme s'il n'existait pas" [refused to accept the idea that he would have maintained that the child had been treated by adults like he did not exist].[14]

Following the American release of *Centuries of Childhood*, Ariès spent time in Baltimore lecturing to a new generation of historians and continuing his research on the history of death.[15] One retrospective analysis published twenty years after the original release of the book claimed that "few works have exerted a greater influence upon British and American social historians" than *Centuries of Childhood*.[16] Even so, following the publication of Ariès' work, examinations of child death in the Middle Ages did not receive significant attention for several decades.

The bioarchaeology of infants and children generally does not receive as much attention as it ought to due to understandings of infant death throughout history, understandings that some believe to be reinforced by the "apparent marginalization of infants within mortuary contexts."[17] The study of the history of children's funerals dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, though then it was only of interest as it related to familial tombs.[18] However, following the publication of Grete Lillehammer's 1989 article "A Child is Born," which called on anthropologists to focus more on non-adults in their work, infants and children became the subjects of more serious intellectual consideration.[19]

Over the past few decades, emotion has taken more of a place in historical research. Starting in the mid-1990s, post-processual archaeologists have "argued that the elucidation of human experience [is] a legitimate and important contribution that archaeology might make."[20] They have tried to interpret emotional significance from their findings, while understanding the changing role of emotion over the centuries.

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[13] Philippa Maddern, "Rhetorics of Death and Resurrection: Child Death in Late-Medieval English Miracle Tales," in *Death, Emotion and Childhood in Premodern Europe*, ed. Katie Barclay, Kimberley Reynolds, and Ciara Rawnsley (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 49, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57199-1_3.

[14] Guillaume Gros, "Philippe Ariès : Naissance et Postérité d'un Modèle Interprétatif de l'enfance," *Histoire de l'éducation*, no. 125 (2010): 53–54.

[15] Gros, "Entre traditionalisme et mentalités," 134.

[16] Wilson, "An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès," 132.

[17] Kevin Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker than Baptismal Water: A Late Medieval Perinatal Burial in a Small Household Chest," *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 31, no. 3 (May 2021): 358, https://doi.org/10.1002/oa.2955.

[18] M.F. Bacqué et al., "Mort périnatale et d'un jeune enfant. Histoire des rites et des pratiques funéraires en Europe issus de l'expression affective et sociale du deuil. Première partie : de la Préhistoire aux Lumières," *Neuropsychiatrie de l'Enfance et de l'Adolescence* 66, no. 4 (June 2018): 242, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neurenf.2018.03.001.

[19] Siân E. Halcrow, Nancy Tayles, and Gail E. Elliott, "The Bioarchaeology of Fetuses," in *The Anthropology of the Fetus: Biology, Culture, and Society*, ed. Sallie Han, Tracy K. Betsinger, and Amy B. Scott (New York City and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017): 85.

[20] Sarah Tarlow, "The Archaeology of Emotion and Affect," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 172.

Importantly, not everyone agrees on what information to extrapolate from archaeological findings. For example, many historians view the distinct treatment of children's graves and bodies as an expression of tenderness and love on the part of the parents or other adults involved in the burial.[21] Other historians, however, such as Aubrey Cannon and Katherine Cook, view the physical distance between children's graves and those of adults as a way to minimize the need to acknowledge them, removing them from places where they might be seen more regularly.[22]

During the medieval period, there were up to 100 stillbirths and deaths per 1000 live births.[23] That figure posed a problem for a majority-Christian society that believed that they were born tainted by original sin and required baptism to erase it.[24] The faithful then had to consider what happened to those who had died with no sin but the first on their souls.

Saint Augustine of Hippo shaped how pre-Reformation Christians conceived of sin. He wrote in the fourth century that unbaptized infants would burn in hellfire for all eternity as their souls had not been washed clean of the original sin of Adam and Eve.[25] Theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury continued to endorse Augustine's views into the early twelfth century, but the idea of babies burning in hell for no other crime than being born human discomfited many people.[26] By the later twelfth century, Peter Abelard, himself a father, introduced a gentler theory. He suggested that the stain of original sin alone did not merit any punishment more severe than the denial of "the beatific vision of God" in the afterlife.[27] Peter Lombard disseminated the idea further, leading Pope Innocent III to adopt it into canon in 1201.[28] Although the Church accepted that unbaptized infants would not burn in the fires of hell, the question of where exactly unbaptized infants spent eternity remained.

Later figures in the thirteenth century, notably Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, theorized that there existed a place for unbaptized infants to go after death called *limbus puerorum*, or the limbo of children.[29] There, the souls of infants in limbo rested in eternal darkness, though Albertus clarified that they would not suffer.[30] Albertus wrote that upon the Resurrection, the infants in *limbus*

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[21] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 363; Roberta Gilchrist, "Voices from the Cemetery: The Social Archaeology of Late-Medieval Burial," *Medieval Archaeology* 66, no. 1 (January 2022): 129, https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2022.2003610.

[22] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 129.

[23] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 359.

[24] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 359.

[25] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 359.

[26] Francis A. Sullivan, "The Development of Doctrine about Infants Who Die Unbaptized," *Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391107200101.

[27] Sullivan, "Development of Doctrine," 3–4.

[28] Sullivan, "Development of Doctrine," 4.

[29] Christopher Beiting, "The Nature and Structure of Limbo in the Works of Albertus Magnus," *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 999 (2004): 492.

[30] Beiting, "Structure of Limbo," 499.

puerorum would receive thirty year old bodies, yet they would remain trapped in their dark void away from their families and the light of God.[31]

The invention of both forms of limbo, like that of purgatory, served to soften the uncomfortable binary of the afterlife in Catholic doctrine, although unlike purgatory, medieval parents found little comfort in the idea of limbo.[32] For one, they were not totally inclined to accept its existence, for which reason it appears relatively rarely in medieval religious iconography.[33] Furthermore, the concept of limbo "proved culturally dissatisfying."[34] It does not fit neatly into the framework of an afterlife where God rewarded the good and punished the sinners. Confusing theological explanations about how it was not technically a punishment did little to mitigate "l'angoisse des parents qui ne supportaient pas l'idée que leur enfant ne puisse y être pleinement heureux" [the anguish of parents who could not bear the idea that their children could not be entirely happy there].[35]

Parents could often come to terms with the fact of their child's death, but not so much the total severance of ties that a lack of baptism could cause.[36] If an infant died before a baptism could be administered, no matter where they were sent in the afterlife, they would be excluded from burial in consecrated ground, and they would not be resurrected with the rest of the Christians at the end of the world.[37] Therefore, they were separated from their families four times over; through death, burial, the afterlife, and, later, by the Resurrection. In a time that placed such heavy emphasis on the importance of the afterlife, that separation must have seemed torturous to the parents.

By the mid to late Middle Ages, the Church allowed any layperson, including women, to baptize an infant whose survival appeared to be at risk.[38] Later, a member of the clergy would need to validate the emergency baptism, and he would require witness testimony confirming that the ritual was performed correctly on a live infant.[39] If those present succeeded in baptizing a newborn before it passed away, they could find some solace in the belief that the baby would spend an eternity in heaven, with God and other lost family members. On the other hand, the obligation of the laity to perform baptisms in moments of crisis placed the responsibility for any lost infants squarely on their shoulders.

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[31] Beiting, "Structure of Limbo," 499.

[32] Isabelle Séguy and Michel Signoli, "Quand La Naissance Côtoie La Mort: Pratiques Funéraires et Religion Populaire En France Au Moyen Âge et à l'époque Moderne," in *Nasciturus, Infans, Puerulus Vobis Mater Terra: La Muerte En La Infancia* (Servei d'Investigacions Arqueològiques i Prehistòriques, 2008), 501.

[33] Bacqué et al., "Mort périnatale," 245.

[34] Steven Bednarski and Andrée Courtemanche, "'Sadly and with a Bitter Heart': What the Caesarean Section Meant in the Middle Ages," Florilegium 28, no. 1 (January 2011): 57, https://doi.org/10.3138/flor.28.003.

[35] Séguy and Signoli, "Quand La Naissance," 500–501.

[36] Séguy and Signoli, "Quand La Naissance," 500–501.

[37] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 359; Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 48.

[38] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 359; Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 42.

[39] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 359.

If a woman died in childbirth with the fetus still inside of her, the medieval Church strongly encouraged a postmortem uterine section, known as a *sectio in mortua,* so that the infant might receive salvation.[40] The idea of the surgical extraction of a fetus in the Middle Ages brings to mind images of a man deciding to sacrifice his wife in favor of a potential heir. The fact of the matter is, such operations were performed—to our knowledge—exclusively on the bodies of women already dead. When in the late sixteenth century a man suggested that such operations might be performed on living women, he sparked outrage from other medical doctors who called the idea "horrible," and said that the operation could only appeal to sadists who wanted to watch women suffer.[41] Even in cases of *sectiones in mortua*, when the mother had already died and could feel no pain, the procedure took a psychological toll on those involved. First hand accounts suggest a discomfort with cutting open the body of a dead woman in an act that must have felt like a mutilation.

One document from Volx in the latter half of the fifteenth century gives an account of a man named Nicolau Fabri whose wife, Catarino, died due to complications during labor.[42] Nicolau petitioned the local bailiff, asking, "with a bitter heart," for permission to allow a barber-surgeon to perform a *sectio in mortua*, "as is normal to be done in such situations."[43] People in the Middle Ages understood that they had a very short window of time between the death of the mother and the death of the fetus.[44] Given that fact, it seems unlikely that Nicolau drew up his petition before the actual procedure. In fact, he filed the petition at the request of the surgeon, who "sought that a public mandate or document be made for him," for his records.[45] The charter may have served as a kind of insurance, indicating a level of anxiety surrounding the opening of a dead woman's body. The fact that the procedure took place at all, and regularly at that, indicates how crucial medieval people understood baptism to be.

One final desperate measure remained for parents who had been categorically unable to baptize their infant before its death: the respite shrine. There, mourners could bring the deceased baby and implore the saints to revive it long enough to receive the rite of baptism, at which point the soul of the baby would ascend to heaven.[46] Respite shrines were very common in western Europe during the

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[40] Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 43.

[41] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991): 45, https://doi.org/10.7298/564m-rx37.

[42] Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 36.

[43] Archives Départementales Des Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, Series 2E, Register 2920, Fols. 60v- 61; 2E 3878 Fol. 176v; and 2E 3901 Fol. 43, quoted in Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 61–62.

[44] Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 40, 43.

[45] Archives Départementales Des Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, Series 2E, Register 2920, Fols. 60v- 61; 2E 3878 Fol. 176v; and 2E 3901 Fol. 43, quoted in Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 62.

[46] Séguy and Signoli, "Quand La Naissance," 503.

medieval period, growing in popularity over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[47] At least 2000 supposed miracles were performed at one shrine alone in modern-day Switzerland over a period of around 150 years, which averages out to one per month over the span of several generations.[48]

The journey could be arduous, for which reason mothers recovering from the strains of childbirth rarely went, with family and neighbors going in their place.[49] Travel parties sometimes numbered in the dozens, becoming a kind of community ordeal.[50] While families usually brought their babies to respite shrines immediately after their death, some only did so after they had already buried them in unhallowed ground.[51] The psychological element of carrying the body of an infant, who had in some cases been dead long enough to start to decompose, must have weighed on the travelers. They had hope, but no guarantee that they would succeed in their aim, and the stakes were clearly high. Some likely saw the experience as "une forme de pénitence, d'expiation des péchés des parents, « punis » avec la naissance d'un enfant mort qui n'a pu bénéficier du baptême" [a form of penitence, of expiation of the sins of parents 'punished' with the birth of a dead infant who could not be baptized].[52]

When the party arrived at the shrine they would pray to various intercessory saints, possibly for hours.[53] Eventually, people would come to believe that the baby had been revived due to various supposed signs of life. Some may have interpreted basic elements of decomposition as the infant returning to life. Hours or days after death, when rigor mortis recedes and the body relaxes, "des bruits, proches du spasme, du gémissement ou du sanglot, se font entendre" [noises, close to spasms, moans, or tears, are heard].[54] Additionally, the relaxation of muscles can cause the opening of the mouth or eyes and the movement of limbs, which likely seemed compelling to those who saw it.[55] Although people may have understood how decomposition manifests, most people who saw signs of life likely sincerely believed that they were real. The pilgrims who traveled to respite shrines did so because they believed in miracles, and so they likely saw what they wanted to see.[56] In their desperation and blind hope, they likely seized on anything that would have allowed for the infant's baptism.

A small minority of people manufactured signs of life, probably out of the same impulse that led parents and midwives to baptize infants they knew had already died. One such sign of life included

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[47] Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 47; Séguy and Signoli, "Quand La Naissance," 503.

[48] Jacques Gélis, "Comment faisait-on autrefois le deuil de l'enfant mort-né ? Le rituel du « sanctuaire à répit »," *Le Carnet PSY* 186, no. 1 (2015): 36, https://doi.org/10.3917/lcp.186.0032.

[49] Bacqué et al., "Mort périnatale," 245.

[50] Jacques Gélis, "Miracle et Médecine Aux Siècles Classiques: Le Corps Médical et Le Retour Temporaire à La Vie Des Mort-Nés," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 9, no. 1/2 (1982): 93.

[51] Bacqué et al., "Mort périnatale," 245.

[52] Bacqué et al., "Mort périnatale," 245.

[53] Gélis, "Miracle et Médecine," 93.

[54] Gélis, "Miracle et Médecine," 94.

[55] Gélis, "Comment faisait-on autrefois," 34.

[56] Gélis, "Miracle et Médecine," 92-93.

the upward movement of a feather via thermal lift over an infant's body which had been heated with hot coals, imitating breath.[57] The Church criticized the falsification of signs of life and denied the validity of baptisms performed on their grounds, but they could do nothing to prevent people from misunderstanding other signs, or simply imagining them.[58]

The idea that their deceased unbaptized infants could burn in hell or be otherwise excluded from heaven exacerbated the suffering of grieving parents and gave them a sense of guilt for having failed to secure the salvation of their children.[59] As the desperation that drove efforts to baptize their infant by any means curdled into grief when the infant did not survive, the question that followed was that of what to do with the remains if the baptism had not been successful.

The creation of the cemetery as a sacred place that could be tainted by the inhumation of unbaptized individuals took place in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[60] Many believed that the burial of the unbaptized with the baptized would compromise their salvation, and so had an incentive to prevent it. When normative burial practices were forbidden, communities came up with multiple alternative rituals to honor the children that they had lost.

Some medieval infant burial rituals could have potentially served as a form of posthumous baptism. During the Middle Ages, burials of neonates and infants sometimes clustered around the walls of churches in a phenomenon known as "eaves-drip" burials.[61] The most favored explanation of those eaves-drip burials is that grieving parents believed that the rainwater that would fall from the roof of the church onto their child's grave "would have become sanctified by contact with a holy building," and potentially compensate for the infants lack of baptism in life.[62] In another potential form of posthumous baptism, some medieval parents buried their unbaptized infants in decommissioned baptisteries, possibly in the hopes that contact with the hallowed ground might contribute to their child's salvation.[63] In one Italian medieval church, 80% of those buried in the decommissioned baptistery died before the age of six years, and while many of them who had lived even a few days had likely been baptized, it is possible that parents may have believed that the location of burial could

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[57] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 132; Gélis, "Miracle et Médecine," 92.
[58] Gélis, "Miracle et Médecine," 92.
[59] Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 44.
[60] Bacqué et al., "Mort périnatale," 245.
[61] Elizabeth Craig-Atkins, "Eavesdropping on Short Lives: Eaves-Drip Burial and the Differential Treatment of Children One Year of Age and under in Early Christian Cemeteries," in *Medieval Childhood*, ed. D. M. Hadley and K. A. Hemer, vol. 3, Archaeological Approaches (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2014): 95–113, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1drt6.10; Madison Crow, Colleen Zori, and Davide Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality in Christian Death: The Burial of Unbaptized Infants in Medieval Italy," *Religions* 11, no. 12 (December 2020): sec. 2.2. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11120678.
[62] Craig-Atkins, "Eaves-Drip Burial," 102.
[63] Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 3.3.

increase the potency of the baptism and protect those who had died before they could become full members of their religious community.[64]

Rules surrounding the exclusion of unbaptized infants from burial in consecrated ground were not consistently followed. Some families decided that their infant's burial within consecrated ground was more important than the dictates of canon law and took it upon themselves to perform clandestine burials within churchyards. It is not possible to know with full certainty which excavated gravesites belong to unbaptized neonates since baptism does not leave a mark on the body, but indications such as gestational age can suggest to archaeologists and historians that baptism was unlikely.[65]

Burials of neonates sometimes involved rites and rituals that differed from the hegemonic standard. Some communities in medieval Italy buried fetuses and infants in roof tiles in a tradition that dates back to Ancient Rome.[66] The practice seems to have been relatively common, and may have provided a certain gravity to the burial of an infant to whom the traditional Catholic rite was unavailable. While tile burials were an Italian phenomenon, it follows across Europe that parents ritualized the illicit burials of their stillborn children. In 2018, archaeologists examining a medieval churchyard in England found remains believed to be those of a late term fetus. The remains were laid out west to east, as dictated by Catholic tradition in a small oak box with iron fittings, including a lock that had been repaired.[67] That container would have been an item of high monetary value within the household and would not have been chosen at random. It seems that the parents chose a receptacle that showed respect for their child, despite the fact that they weren't entitled to any particular rites according to the Church.

Beyond the archaeological data, records from throughout the Middle Ages show that clandestine burials were a recognized phenomenon that the Church had to suppress. One Florentine man, Luca da Panzano, wrote about the potentially clandestine burial of his son. Although the person who delivered the infant claimed that he was stillborn, Luca baptized him and buried him in a churchyard.[68] Similarly, legal records contain many accusations against midwives for post-mortem baptisms and clandestine burials.[69] In part because of that lack of regard for the laws of the Church, the Dean and Chapter of Hereford Cathedral received a royal license in 1389 to encircle their churchyard with walls and a gate that locked.[70]

When families could not, or chose not to try to, bury their offspring in consecrated ground, they commonly chose instead to bury their child in or around the home. Exact methods varied, but

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[64] Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 3.3.
[65] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 362.
[66] Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 3.2.
[67] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 361, 362.
[68] Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 2.2.
[69] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Not of Woman Born, 26; Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 363.
[70] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 363.

populations across Europe practiced domestic burial, including the burial of infants up to six months old.[71] Some chose to bury their child under the floor of their home, others chose to bury them under the threshold of the home or in an exterior wall, while still others chose to bury them around the home.[72]

Philippe Ariès made specific reference in *Centuries of Childhood* to the phenomenon of domestic burial of infants and children in Basque culture. The conclusion which he drew was that Basque parents would have viewed their dead child as "such an unimportant little thing," that it was fit to bury them "much as we today bury a domestic pet, a cat or a dog."[73] However, Ariès either did not know or neglected to mention that death and the home had a close relationship in Basque culture. For one, domestic burial has roots in Basque mythology, where a boy was able to return to life as he had been buried in his family's garden.[74] Additionally, the Basques saw their relatives, living or dead, "as one who belonged to the house, the family."[75] That perspective influenced the decision to bury the dead— adults as well as children— in or around the homestead.[76] The burial of unbaptized children on their family's property is therefore a phenomenon linked to Basque cultural tradition, rather than an indication that they viewed their late offspring as trash of which they needed to dispose.

Non-normative burial practices of the very young extended beyond just the efforts to honor the unbaptized. First of all, excavations of medieval churchyards across Europe found grave goods with the remains of infants and children more frequently than with those of adults.[77] The presence of grave goods indicates an additional level of care that people showed for the burial of the very young. Some objects from infant and child graves had religious value, while others, such as domestic objects, accessories, or "small polished stones" seem to have been of a more sentimental nature.[78]

Moreover, medieval people tended to position the bodies of deceased infants and children differently than those of adults within their graves. Examples from across western Europe, such as in England, Belgium, and Switzerland, show that infants and children were often laid out on their sides, curled up in a fetal position.[79] That placement is notable because it is distinct; adults were typically

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[71] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 134.

[72] Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 2.4; Ariès, "Centuries of Childhood," 39; Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 134–135; Katarzyna Mirgos, "Death in Basque Culture," *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia*, no. 7 (2013): 75.

[73] Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 39.

[74] Katarzyna Mirgos, "Death in Basque Culture," *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia*, no. 7 (2013): 74–75.

[75] Mirgos, "Death in Basque Culture," 75.

[76] Mirgos, "Death in Basque Culture," 75.

[77] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 129; Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 3.3.

[78] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 129.

[79] Gélis, "Comment faisait-on autrefois," 36; Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 363; Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 129.

buried lying on their backs with their arms crossed.[80] Additionally, the children buried in the curled position, including those of infants buried clandestinely, were generally still laid out in the west to east alignment dictated by Church law.[81]

Clusters of child and infant graves were sometimes located in areas with higher foot traffic so that they could "benefit from more frequent intercessory prayers," which was urgent in an era when people believed that such prayers might speed a soul's journey to heaven.[82] Intercessory prayers may have also felt more important to parents of unbaptized infants, many of whom "subscribed to the non-canonical belief" that their own devotion and religious practice might save the souls of their lost infants."[83]

The expectations of mourning were different in the Middle Ages than they are today. Showing strong negative emotions upon the death of a child or loved one was generally discouraged across religious lines because it indicated anger against the divine, which demonstrated insufficient piety and potential doubts about the religious afterlife.[84] It also indicated a prioritization of the mortal body over the immortal soul, which was antithetical to Catholic doctrine.[85] Furthermore, stoicism dominated some medieval Christian intellectual spheres, and those who subscribed to that philosophy viewed visible mourning as a cession of self control that could lead someone to yield to dangerous and immoral passions.[86] The Church expected people to accept the deaths of their children with grace, without lashing out or expressing anger, and the fact that they needed to clarify that position implies that popular reactions to grief flew in the face of that expectation.

Beyond religious advice and cultural conventions providing guidelines on what grief ought to look like, more rigid structures existed to dictate how people mourned. Some medieval Italian communes had laws that forbade "histrionic displays of grief and public laments for the dead," going so far as to send spies to funerals to fine those who showed excessive grief.[87] The legislation of acceptable emotional expression paints the picture of a society in which the popular practices conflicted with the more high-minded ideals.

Some of the reports of violations of the laws restricting public mourning demonstrated the communal nature of grief for a lost child. In one case in Orvieto, Italy, dozens of men "gathered

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[80] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 129.
[81] Cootes et al., "Blood Is Thicker," 363; Gélis, "Comment faisait-on autrefois," 36.
[82] Gilchrist, "Voices From the Cemetery," 129.
[83] Bednarski and Courtemanche, "Caesarean," 45.
[84] Avner Gil'adi, "'The Child Was Small... Not So the Grief for Him': Sources, Structure, and Content of Al-Sakhawi's Consolation Treatise for Bereaved Parents," *Poetics Today* 14, no. 2 (1993): 376, https://doi.org/10.2307/1773124; Carol Lansing, *Passion and Order: Restraint of Grief in the Medieval Italian Communes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv2n7mzm.
[85] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 82.
[86] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 7
[87] Lansing, *Passion and Order,* 2

together to weep and lament" over the death of a nobleman's son.[88] The act of coming together to at least perform grief indicates a certain solidarity with the bereaved parents and illustrates the "social and affective" ties that bound medieval communities.[89] It demonstrates that people understood that parents mourning the loss of their child might appreciate a show of solidarity. Interestingly, among the men who were fined for their violation of the law were those who had written them.[90] We might understand that dichotomy as a form of hypocrisy, but it can also indicate the internal conflict of people's values in a time when the moral dictates from on high contradicted the traditional social response to tragedy.

There was also a gendered element to the legal suppression of expressions of grief. While people in the Middle Ages understood that anyone could experience pain at the loss of a loved one, they perceived acts such as weeping or wailing as feminine and emasculating, and so some fathers might try to conceal the signs of grief—though not the emotion itself.[91] That distinction highlights the broader medieval attitude towards grief. People could feel it, but they should not channel that feeling into any form of expression that might indicate a loss of self control or a lack of faith.

Beyond the internal pressures that provoked gendered reactions to grief, the laws that governed acceptable mourning practice turned most often against men.[92] The laws therefore appear to take on an additional role as a weapon of the legal system to enforce philosophical ideals of masculinity.

Even discussions of grief amongst ordinary people tend to turn towards the teachings of the stoics, though they also indicate an understanding of the necessity of feeling grief before attempting to manage it. A book of household advice written by a bourgeois Parisian in 1393 recounts the reactions of a couple, Prudence and Mellibée, to the brutal murder of their daughter. When Mellibée sees what has happened, he reacts with violent grief, weeping, groaning, and tearing his clothes.[93] Initially Prudence admonishes him for his display, which only makes him weep harder. Seeing the flaw in her initial response, she recalls Ovid's counsel in *Remedia Amoris* that "cellui est fol qui s'efforce d'empeschier la mère de plorer la mort de son enfant, jusques à tant qu'elle se soit bien vuidée de larmes et saoulée de plorer. Lors il est temps de la conforter et attremper sa douleur par doulces paroles" [he is a fool who tries to stop a mother from weeping at the death of her child until she is fully emptied of tears and has wept sufficiently. Then it is time to comfort her and ease her pain with soft words].[94]

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[88] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 5

[89] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 5

[90] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 2

[91] Didier Lett, "Parents Distraught at the Death of a Child. Paternal and Maternal Emotions in Early Thirteenth-Century England," trans. Marian Rothstein, *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, no. 47 (2018): 186–187.

[92] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 2, 48.

[93] *Le Ménagier de Paris: Traité de morale et d'économie domestique, composé en 1393 par un bourgeois parisien*, vol. 1 (1393; repr., Paris, 1846): 187, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/44070/pg44070-images.html.

[94] *Le Ménagier de Paris*, 187.

Their story, though fictional, has value in showing the idealization of stoicism in the face of loss but also resistance to that ideal. After Mellibée has wept for a time, a debate ensues. Prudence references the stoic philosopher Seneca, who said that people should take the deaths of their children as lightly as they ought to take their own, and Mellibée responds that even Christ wept for the death of his friend.[95] She counters that "plourer atrempéement soit permis, toutesvoies plorer desmesuréement est deffendu" [crying is permitted in moderation, however, excessive weeping is not].[96] The fact that Mellibée resists the philosophy that his wife promotes and asserts his right to feel and express his pain indicates that stoic ideals did not enjoy universal acceptance.

Some writers in the medieval Muslim world compiled diverse contemporary materials that discussed reactions to the deaths of children into advice books known as consolation treatises.[97] The works served as tools to "channel the strong emotional reactions of bereaved parents into legitimate religious modes of mourning," rather than those that might indicate mistrust or a lack of faith in the divine.[98] Generally that meant that parents should accept that the death of their child was God's will, and that they should bear that will with patience and grace. The need to channel strong emotions into religious matters upon the death of a child— which the treatises instructed— testifies to the existence of those strong emotions.[99] The treatises show without a doubt that parental instincts overrode "cultural-religious dictates" that encouraged stoicism in the face of loss.[100]

People wrote consolation treatises to advise people on how to cope with grief. As such, they present idealized images of appropriate mourning, but also more realistic accounts. The reactions to the loss of a child that one sees in a consolation treatise, despite the contemporary encouragement of stoicism, are familiar to a modern reader. One treatise recounts experiences of bereaved parents who could not eat or sleep, who became physically weak, and who were further disturbed upon seeing their late child's toys or another child who looked like them.[101]

Accounts of the miracles of medieval saints make up an invaluable resource for the examination of child death in the Middle Ages. The resurrection of infants who had died unbaptized was often "a key miracle cited in canonization processes," meaning that a variety of depictions survive today.[102] They offer a look at the reactions of families as well as other community members upon the death of a child in the form of a narrative scene rather than archaeological data for historians to interpret.

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[95] *Le Ménagier de Paris*, 187–188.
[96] *Le Ménagier de Paris*, 188.
[97] Gil'adi, "The Child Was Small," 371.
[98] Gil'adi, "The Child Was Small," 367–368.
[99] Gil'adi, "The Child Was Small," 368.
[100] Gil'adi, "The Child Was Small," 385.
[101] Gil'adi, "The Child Was Small," 376.
[102] Crow, Zori, and Zori, "Doctrinal and Physical Marginality," sec. 2.2.

Parents in miracle stories frequently reacted to the deaths of their children with violent displays of grief, though the descriptions of those reactions differed along gender lines. Fathers sometimes appeared "numb, silent, even stunned" upon learning of what had happened.[103] They might additionally try to comfort their wives while refusing to accept comfort in return in an effort to fulfill the expected role of husband as protector.[104] Invariably, however, the stoic facade could not last forever and the father broke down in tears just like his wife.[105] Essentially, miracle accounts suggest that a father's grief invariably outweighed his social conditioning, however strong that might be.

In line with medieval ideas about women as slaves to "passion," miracle accounts generally present mothers as uncontrolled in their grief in contrast to the father's attempts at stoicism.[106] Tears fall well within the accepted behavior for women, but the violence that grief leads them to enact against themselves takes them out of the bounds of femininity—even out of civilization as they understood it.[107] Medieval society saw women's perceived lack of control over their emotions as dangerous, using the Greek mythological figure of Medea as a representation of the potential consequences.[108]

Furthermore, accounts of miracles show that grief and mourning for infants and children who died extended to non-family adults in their communities. When a child died and no biological parent was present to express grief, other adults, such as adoptive parents or neighbors, expressed grief in their place, sometimes noted to be equal to that of any parent.[109]

Medieval parents frequently lost children and had to come up with strategies to cope with that loss. The hegemonic religious practice of the day did not provide sufficient comfort for such a painful event, so people created their own. The baptismal rituals for stillborn infants demonstrated that people cared about their children before they were even born, and alternative burial rituals for children show that they wanted to memorialize them beyond the simple burial that the Church mandated.

The same spirit that drove medieval parents to circumvent societal ideals around mourning continued for generations. Up until the twentieth century, Irish Catholic communities created alternative burial grounds, called Cilliní, for unbaptized infants in order to honor and grieve for them while still respecting the laws of the Church that forbade their burial in consecrated ground.[110] While the Cilliní are a decidedly post-medieval phenomenon, first appearing during the

[103] Lett, "Parents Distraught," 186.
[104] Lett, "Parents Distraught," 185–186.
[105] Lett, "Parents Distraught," 182, 186–187.
[106] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 7.
[107] Lett, "Parents Distraught," 190.
[108] Lansing, *Passion and Order*, 7.
[109] Maddern, "Rhetorics of Death and Resurrection," 53–54.
[110] Eileen M. Murphy, "Children's Burial Grounds in Ireland (Cilliní) and Parental Emotions Toward Infant Death," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15, no. 3 (2011): 416.

Counter-Reformation period, they still show a popular resistance to the callousness of Catholic doctrine surrounding infant burial, even in times when mortality was higher.[111]

Ultimately, the impulse to grieve for and honor a child who has died is not a novel phenomenon. Modern research points to the fact that although people expressed their pain differently in centuries past, they still suffered when their children died. The different practices and rituals that people came up with are a testament to their will to respect those who passed, even when thinking of them caused them pain.

[111] Murphy, "Cilliní," 410.

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