

Debates in Funerary Archaeology

Critically evaluate the role of memory and forgetting in funerary rites.

2,523 words

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Introduction

This piece critically evaluates the role of memory and forgetting within the funerary rites of two differing cultures across the medieval period. The paper will follow a format of example, evidence, theory and critical evaluation with the concluding chapter, linking the theories to the rest of the text. The particular focus of this essay will be the funerary rites of medieval religious graves, particularly the geographical placement and positioning of inhumations in relation to 'important' structures such as churches or 'ancient' monuments (not limited to Christian ideas of holy or religious monuments) and why; as well as how these funerals rites reflect the society of the time as well as emotional responses as theorised by the anthropological, archaeological likes of Stutz (2013) and Tarlow (1999).

Funeral rites are activities and rituals that people of the living world undertake to help themselves and or which people believe helps the spirit of the dead (however spirit is defined or referred to) or *other* pass on to the next stage (Gilchrist, 2008, 149). This is in addition to helping survivors and peers with processing grief and change, can help archaeologists in gathering insight into the community members of the deceased. This is remarkably important for the material culture of current society, archeologists in aiding the remembrance in the present, remember who the living were.

An evaluation of mortuary monuments, most significantly at the Sandwell Priory in the West Midlands, Carmarthen Greyfriars in South-West Wales and the Bordesley Abbey in Worcestershire (Williams, 2003, 229) will be followed by a comparison to earlier medieval burials of Anglo-Saxons whose burials signify and represent the deceased's status and social position as a material form once dead. However, these 'roles' of the dead can be re-evaluated between differing deceased individuals, and

therefore the dead can in turn be placed within separate social scales to better understand historical deaths. This use of analytics can help archaeologists create a theoretical scaffolding of the society analysed, thereby able to be inserted within greater subjections (Pearson, 1982). By studying the funerary rites of past civilisations, archaeologists can infer how memories were kept in cultures distinctly different from today, providing us with crucial ways of observing the past.

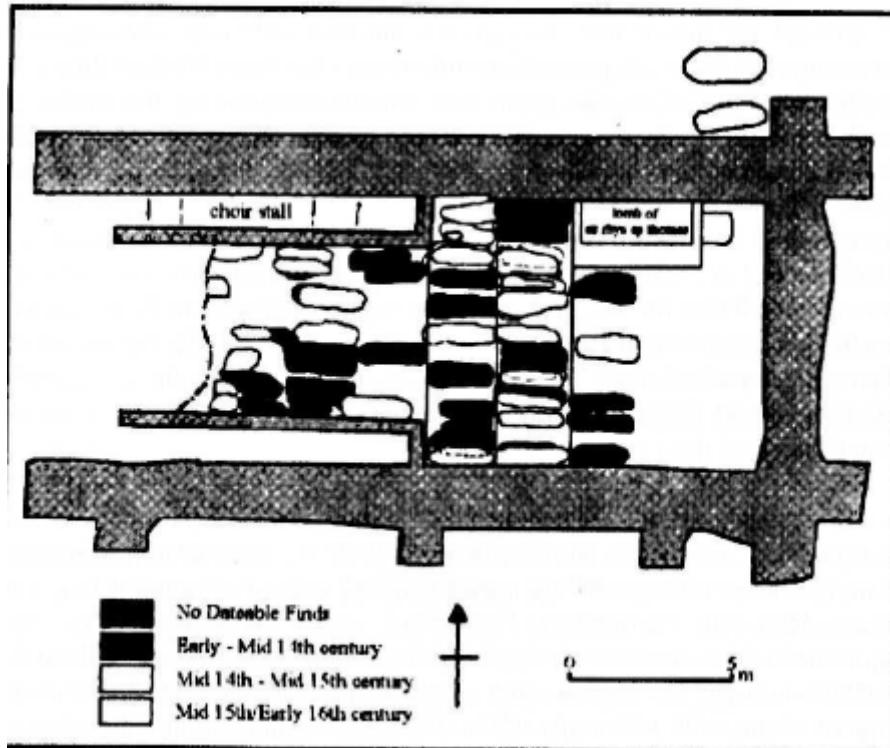


Figure 1: Franciscan Friary. Williams 2003

Early Medieval Dead

Craig Atkinson (2014) discusses the phenomenon of Eave burials at churches during the early Christianisation period around the tenth to eleventh century. Eaves-drip burials are categorised by the burial of the deceased, primarily infants or those who have not been baptised, underneath the eave, an area of the roof which hangs over the side of the building to provide shelter and allowing rain water run off. It is assumed that the water which runs down and splashes into the ground, is holy, and therefore those unfortunate, are being baptised in death through the water that soaks into their graves (Atkinson, 2014, 6, 7). These burials are still being debated whether they were produced purposely or not. There is a sense that the body was buried

under these sloping roofs due to the ground being softened by the constant moist state of the dirt, and the reality that there is no particular distinguished pattern to the burials.

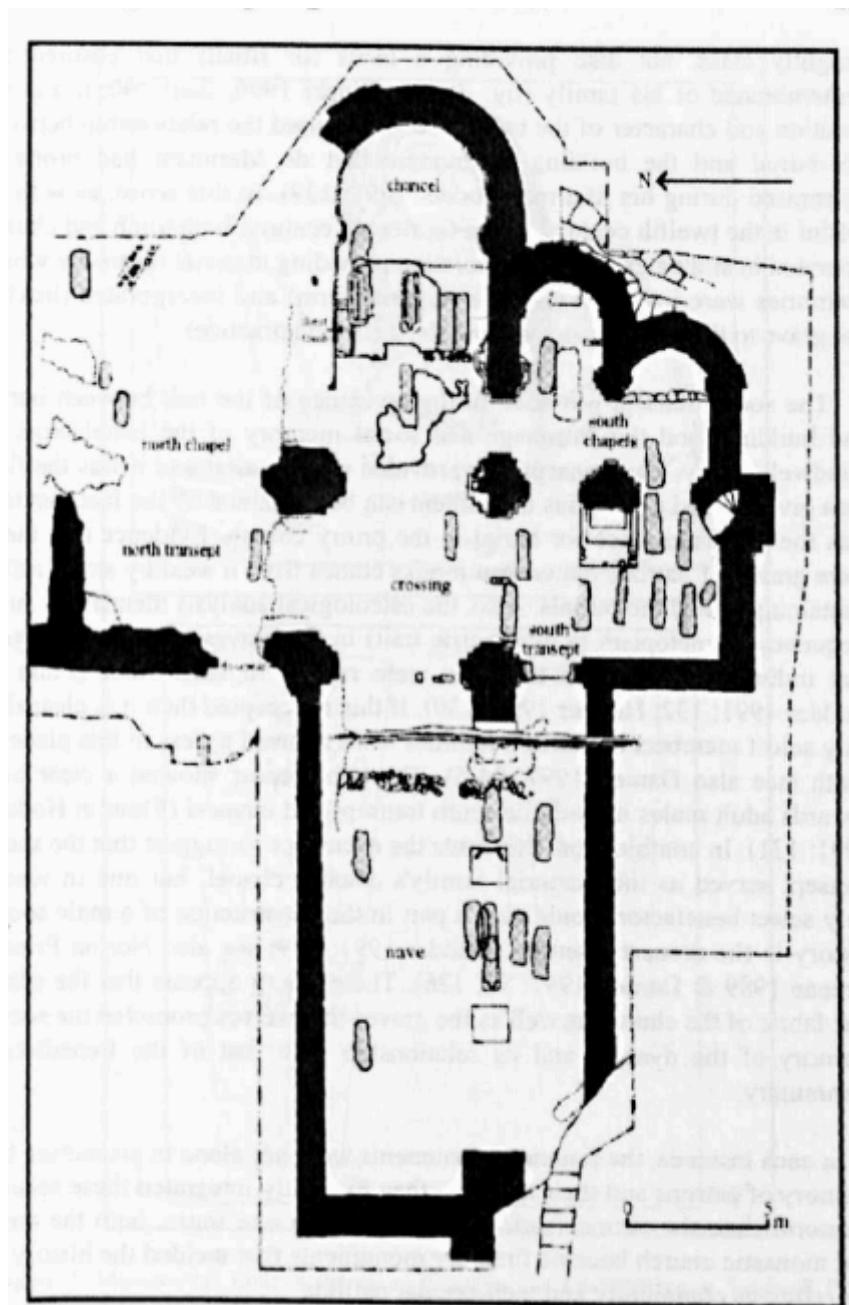


Figure 2: Sandwell Priory. Williams 2003

The archaeology of religious houses by Howard Williams (2003) sheds light on three distinct places of burial during the later medieval period. William's paper describes how religious houses were founded and patronized by the secular to become places of worship for medieval societies, the houses being the Benedictine Sandwell Priory

in the West Midlands, Carmarthen Greyfriars in South-West Wales and the Bordesley Abbey in Worcestershire. Williams (2003), before addressing the three burial sites he has decided on, makes clear to the reader several ideas sustained by other archaeologists one suggestion of material culture refers to its use as a way to commemorate the lives of the deceased within the funerary practices of medieval times, this also allowed the dead to ascertain certain 'material' properties that showed the customs of the time. Furthermore, Williams (2003) expands upon the significance of memory and forgetting within late medieval times with the introduction of the Christian 'purgatory' of souls and strategies of commemoration to make sure one was remembered within social memory and materialise themselves within the fabric of the church. By having the dead buried alongside or within churches, the hope is that prayers of the living would directly impact upon the dead and fate of their souls; as such, the medieval population would want to be placed within an optimum way to receive these prayers for the soul.

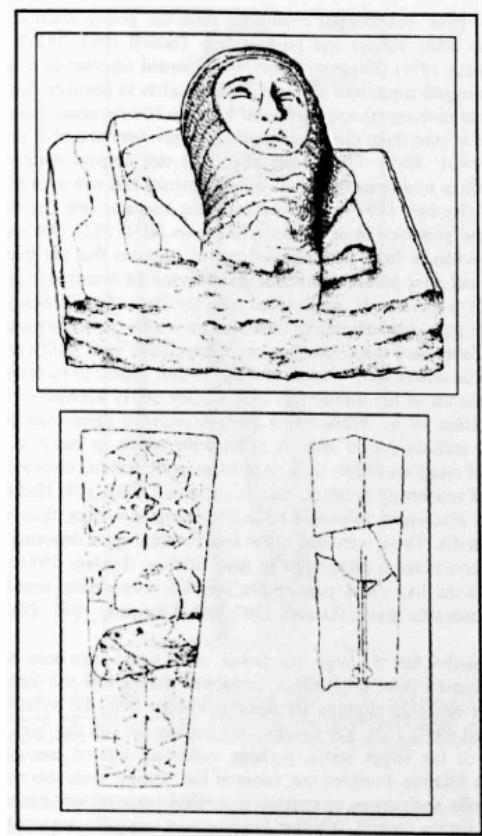


Figure 3: Monumental Stone at Sandwell Priory. Williams 2003

Distinctively, the dead were buried layered within the church floors, (see *figure 1*, *figure 2*), within monuments, (see *figure 3*), or as commemoration gifts on the walls and windows of the church. This evolved to serve the patrons with differing ways of remembering into a constructed self, with the goal of achieving salvation, remembrance of the collective dead, as well as drawing the dead into the church calendar to achieve a consistent state of remembrance (Graves, 1989 cited in Williams, 2003, 231).

Nevertheless, a divide between the burial customs of the elite and the common people can be found, reflecting levels of status and authority within society. The common people, buried outside the church in graveyards may possibly have their resting places disturbed, or in some way modified. This obliteration of earlier graves as an act of forgetting may seem more individual but in reality it connects the past and present together through a shared resting place and is therefore, a remembrance of the dead as a community of the deceased rather than deceased individuals. This is also perpetuated by later sayings of 'pray for our souls' during the ritual practices of the church calendar and being incorporated into the habits of the community, rather than praying for individuals. By being buried within memorials or having monuments raised within the church, the elites saw themselves as worthy of having their identity preserved even after death. These elite burials were of great importance to the living family members as they served to uphold any socio-political power the deceased had and reflect the status of the family.

Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries

Williams (1997) studies the phenomenon of Anglo-Saxon re-use of Roman and prehistoric monuments as burial sites at an nationwide level and produces a series of diagrams, (see *figure 4* and *figure 5*), describing this as well as an explanation of reasons this might happen. The monuments being used by these Anglo-Saxons are primarily round barrows, Roman structures, hill forts and other monuments, (see *figure 6*), that look as though they are used with purpose (Musty, 1989, Farley, et al. 1992 cited in Williams, 1997, 1).

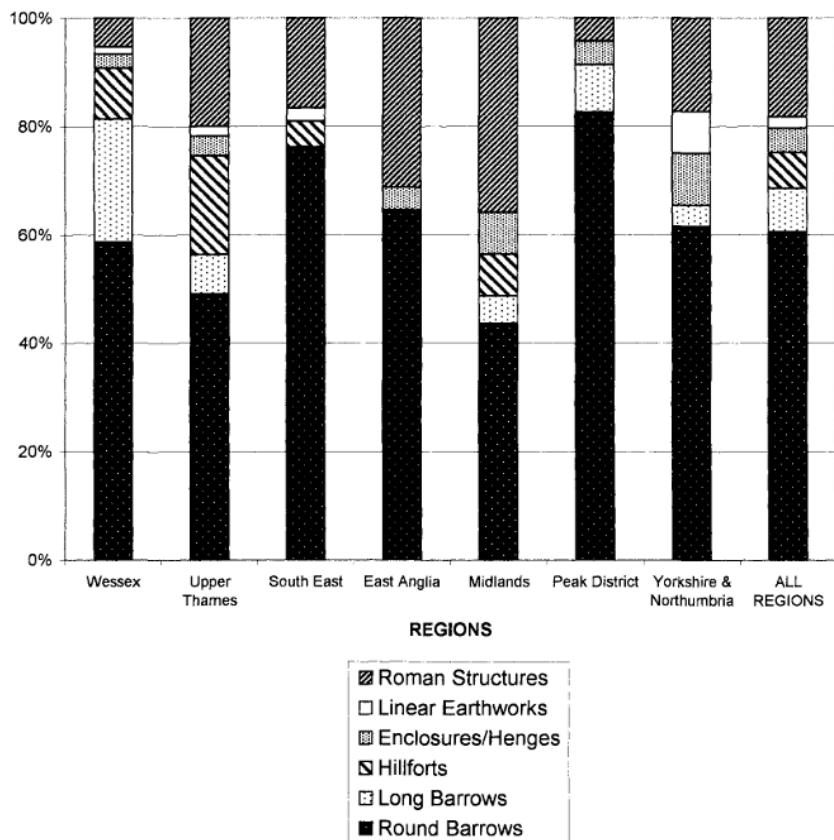


Figure 4: Regional variations in monument reuse by category. Williams 1997

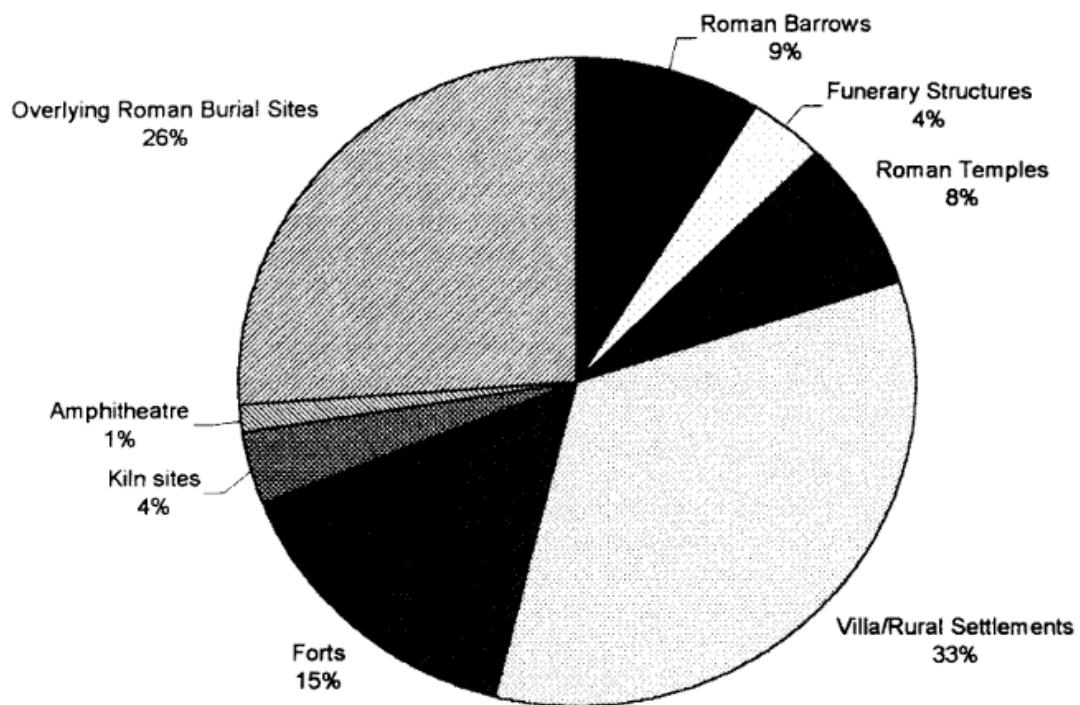


Figure 5: Reuse of Roman sites by monument categories. Williams 1997

Williams (1997) focuses on the appearance of these unique burials, finding 334 examples of ancient monuments being reused by Anglo-Saxons; this constitutes at least one quarter of all burials from Anglo-Saxons in England. The evidence includes burials over the 5th to the 7th centuries with both inhumations and cremations (Williams, 1997, 4). Within these, both elites and those of lower social status have been buried in the same location. We can distinguish the elite through grave goods of inhumations within these burials. This may have been a deliberate symbol of status and power for Anglo-Saxons to connect themselves to their 'ancestors' and the memory of the past, however, a majority of burials have been those of lower status or generational. Burials that have taken place at these sites are associated with the common people rather than the Anglo-Saxon wealthy (McKinley, 1994 cited in Williams 1997, 7). To date these burials, grave goods are primarily used for identification when found, although later within Anglo-Saxon times there is a noticeable decline in grave goods due to the adoption of Christianity (Geake, 1992 cited in Williams 1997, 22).

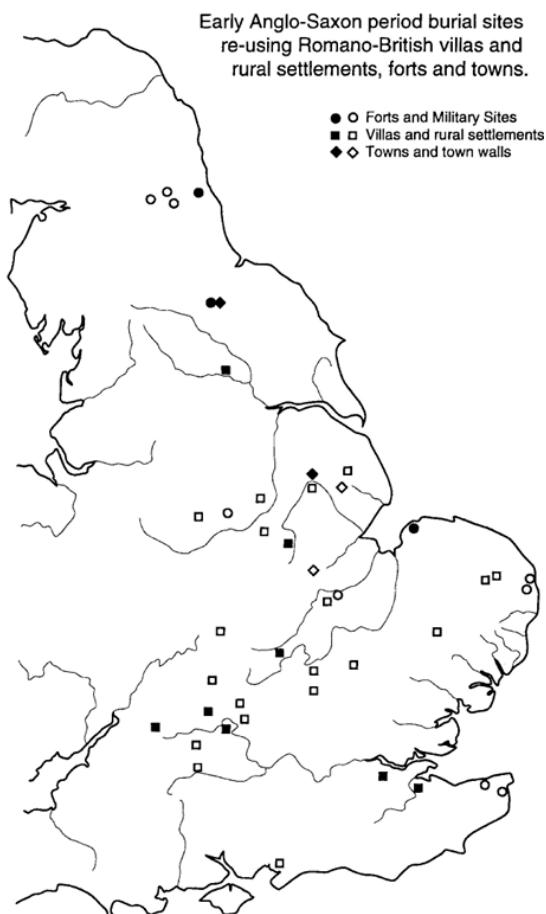


Figure 6: Distribution of Roman period structures reused by early Anglo-Saxon burial sites

Filled symbols = certain cases; open symbols = probable and possible cases, Williams, 1997

Studies referenced by Williams articulate that there may be an ideological, mythological and social significance to these ancient cemeteries such as in their liminality, timelessness and antiquity that may have been encountered by Anglo-Saxons. They may hold important symbolism and serve to maintain moral, social order and differing ideologies. These ideas are perpetuated through the thinking that the dead were believed to dwell in or around long after the funerary rights. The reuse of monuments can be shown in two examples in written literature – the *Beowulf* and *Life of St Guthlac* – which show a focus on the heroic and powerful being buried within ancient constructions (Alexander, 1974, Crossley, 1982, Swanton, 1993 cited in Williams 1997, 3). These examples show a focus on rituals and ceremonies that have happened before living memory. The ‘ancients’ or the ‘ancestors’ may have been endeavoured as a way to possibly link the death of the person, the society and community to the circumstances of these ancestors (Arnhem, Cederroth, Corlin, Lindstrom, 1988 cited in Williams 1997, 23).

This appearance of monument re-use is indicative of a desire to have a relationship with ‘ancestors’ or the past. These locations remained as spaces that existed in the past and present, their involvement with liminal spaces would be akin to interacting with the supernatural (Bradley 1993 cited in Williams 1997, 25). The Anglo-Saxons were revisiting concepts of memory and forgetting through these funerary rites by burying their dead at these monuments, where the community buries their dead in places further away from their settlements as an intersection between themselves and others past their living memory.

Critical Evaluation

During this period of burials, a hybrid form of funerals appears. Organized religion absorbs the magical practices of the civilization it has converted, such as healing charms and relics, while implementing the geographical ideas seen in later inhumations, specifically east-west burials. “Such practices were not merely ‘pagan

survival' but vitally important elements that were deliberately absorbed into a new mix" (Gilchrist, 2008, 120) and as such, Christianity becomes a hybrid cultural form.

The second chapter by Tarlow (1999) in their book on *Bereavement and Commemoration*, creates a sphere of insightful thinking on the subjectivity of emotions, how archaeologists assume civilisations of the past might have experienced grief and empathy, and the ways in which our current cultural conceptions define the assumptions we have surrounding the past. For the burials of the medieval dead, using the chapter on bereavement as a premise, archaeologists can make further speculations. Monuments are seen today as articulated social relationships with others through recurring social practices, such as the burial of the dead within monuments, (Pearson, 1982, cited in Tarlow 1999, 22). These funerary rites are an expression of memorising and forgetting imbued with meaning and values. It is critical for the two case studies to take into account the complex emotional motivations of funerary rites; if archaeologists are unwilling to consider the mentality of the past, the risk of dehumanisation is heightened. This paper finds it crucial to have an empathetic and emotional reaction to the ways medieval populations commemorated their dead, to how they have been forgotten as individuals but developed as a collective to truly understand the past.

The burial of people underneath church floors to, in a sense, destroy the separation of subject/object and blend these together as a physical and metaphorical way of being prayed or thought about alongside the church serves to hold the memory of the dead within the fabric of the church physically and metaphorically. These types of burials are found to be more of an individual choice to be remembered within the collective and be part of the 'souls' prayed for rather than hoping to be remembered as an individual *in aeternum*.

To further expand on the role of memory and forgetting within the funerary rites of the medieval period, archaeologists must take into consideration many areas of how rituals surrounding death impact the social person. Rituals provide a mechanism to cope with the loss of a social being as well as the presence of a dead body, (Strutz,

Tarlow, 2013, 6). Within the first example of places of burial, the dead are buried within layers of the floor or in monuments, contributing to a method of continued preservation as the memory of their dead within a religious context, provides a way to frame the death culturally, socially and emotionally.

The burials of Anglo-Saxons had a similar, although slightly different view of the collective burial within the buildings of their 'ancestors'. This approach of linking their dead, their possible friends and family to the unknown people beyond their living memory is an interesting hypothesis that deserves more emotional, theoretical investigation and analysis. One such option would be as an analysis of how the community decided to reuse these sites rather than staying away from these, at times, domineering fortresses and landmarks. Mortuary monuments directly affect the landscape and how populations interact with the world around them. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon burials focus on the collective monument of placing their dead within these 'forgotten' (or, outside of living memory) locations to unite their past and present, combating the potential for a fear of mortality and social loss (Strutz, Tarlow, 2013, 7).

Conclusion

As far as the role of memory is concerned, the two case studies previously explained in detail have highlighted the importance of the location of funerals and how they impact the memory of the dead for those alive as well as taking a more spiritual view into a metaphorical link for the soul of the dead. The memory of the deceased is reflected in where and how the dead were buried, the examples showing differing ways the memory of the deceased has impacted the funeral rites which those present at their death have taken action to complete. Beyond the memories of those alive, funeral rites can be studied by archaeologists today to discern the cultures and social aspects of the past, providing critical information.

Forgetting, or the act of wanting to not be forgotten is also prevalent in the case studies in differing ways. For Anglo-Saxons, forgetting was more an event that happened to the people of the past, the remnants of their time alive as the only

reminder of their presence. By burying their dead within and around these monuments they connected themselves and their 'ancestors' into the present, creating an area of recollection. However, the later medieval period buried their dead within churches and monasteries, sometimes under eaves, where their dead are, as stated previously, forgotten as an individual and adopted into the fabric of the church.

The similarities, despite the differences between these two sites, are profound and the reason this paper links both to the role of memory and forgetting in funerary rites is the complexity of wanting to be remembered as an individual, in turn forgetting the community; in contrast with being remembered as a part of the community or part of something 'greater' at the sacrifice of the individual.

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