Church and Society in Late Mediaeval Scotland

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The Living and the Dead

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The Christian Death

- Christianity placed death at the centre of the drama of salvation (Christ redeemed the world from the cross and rose from the dead). This centrality encouraged obsession with the dead as a gateway between the temporal and the eternal.

- The Christian view of the person is linear and is linked to view of time and history as moving towards a finite end whose nature is determined by God.

- There were multitudinous provisions for death and burial in Mediaeval Scotland.

- There was popular insistence on maintaining the traditional regime, people held dearly to their rituals of dealing with death. This holding onto death rituals presented challenges to the Protestant reformers.

- This painting is a Pieta, a form of devotional image where the Virgin, or Mother of Christ, is shown alone with the body of her dead son whose death she is mourning. The blue of her cloak is symbolic of the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven.

Why was death important?

- Earthly life was merely a phase of the journey, the pilgrimage, in which individual Christians sought to merit or to earn the reward of heaven, to make a bargain or a contract with God.

- A good death was not a sudden or quick and painless death as we might appreciate today. Instead a good death was one that granted sufficient time to ensure that one was at peace with the community and time to prepare obligations and possessions into order through the dying person's will. Through the will, the soul's future could be cared for. In this way, a good death could ensure satisfactory continuity.

Skeleton from Mediaeval Carmelite Monastery, The Green, Aberdeen.

The rites of death

- The nature of the death rites is conveyed in the *Commendatio animae* (bedside prayers) and the burial rite which separated the person from the earthly society.

- The rites exist to deal with a soul radically separated from earthly concerns by a 'death-bed confession' and a last will.

- The body would fortified by rituals, that including prayers and blessings, by the priest.

- These rites performed on the dead body would help to dispel the ordeals and perils of the dead person's soul, which was now on its journey to paradise

The Tolling of the bell –
death involves the entire community

- When a person died, a bell would toll to inform the community of the death and the priest would make his way to the bedside of the deceased.

- Indulgences were dispensed for persons following and attending the funeral rites, and even for following the priest to the side of the dead.

- There were many rites :-
    - Rites for informing the neighbourhood
    - Rites for laying out the body in the house
    - Domestic rituals
    - Clipping of nails and hair
    - Mourning and reading of the will – rites of lamentation (women)
    - Carrying of the body to the church
    - The office of the dead performed over body at the altar
    - Obligations to be fulfilled towards to soul

- Commemorations and anniversaries – (individual and collective) would be heard in the church by all attending at the year's mind (annual anniversary) etc.

Mort Bell

The Funeral Rite

- The principal religious attraction of the funeral rite was the **Mass for the dead.**

- This rite enabled the bereaved to proceed into the process of fulfilling their obligations towards the soul of the departed – as distinguished from the body.

- By the 15th century, the Mass had become the great vehicle of Christian feelings and finds its beginning in the monasteries of the early Middle Ages.

- A quantitative view of the efficacy of such masses had become established, and priests were paid for saying them. The extent of people's investment in them would vary according to their income.

Centrality of the Mass of the Dead

- The insertion of the mass of the dead into the social arrangements of death represented a large accommodation by the church to the view, denied in principle by the liturgy, that the Christian dead remained part of their own kith and kin.

- Evidence:-
  - Inscriptions in chantry chapels
  - Terms of endowments
  - Discussions of theologians

- It was the nature of the mass of the dead to offer an outlet to such familial piety.

This Mediaeval chalice would have been used to contain wine during the Mass.

See especially: J.Bossy Christianity in the West 1400 – 1700 (1985)

Book of Hours
and Office of the Dead

The Book of Hours contained personal prayers for private use, and were intended for use by the laity. The contents would include the church Kalendar, some Penitential Psalms, and part of the **Office for the Dead**, as well as other texts.

This book is bound in what is known as the 'Grolier style' after the 16th century French book collector, Jean Grolier. The binding is of dark brown leather, with six raised bands on the spine, concealing the cords used to stitch the text blocks together.

The Murthly Hours

- The Murthly Hours is an example of the *Book of hours*, a new kind of prayer book for the laity that made its appearance in the 13th Century. At this time books of hours were written for wealthy laypeople, more often than not, as in the case of the Murthly Hours, women.

- Hours of the Virgin. The beginning of the office for the hour of **Lauds** is marked by a historiated initial. The scene in the initial is the Annunciation to Mary and is based on the account in Luke 1.26-38. The Angel Gabriel's scroll is inscribed with the words 'AVE:MARIA:GR(AT)IA' ('Hail Mary [full of] grace').

The manuscript descend The manuscript descended from the Stewarts of Lorne to the Stewarts of Grandtully, owners of the lands of Murthly in Perthshire, from which it takes its name ed from the Stewarts of Lorne to the Stewarts of Grandtully, owners of the lands of Murthly in Perthshire, from which it takes its name
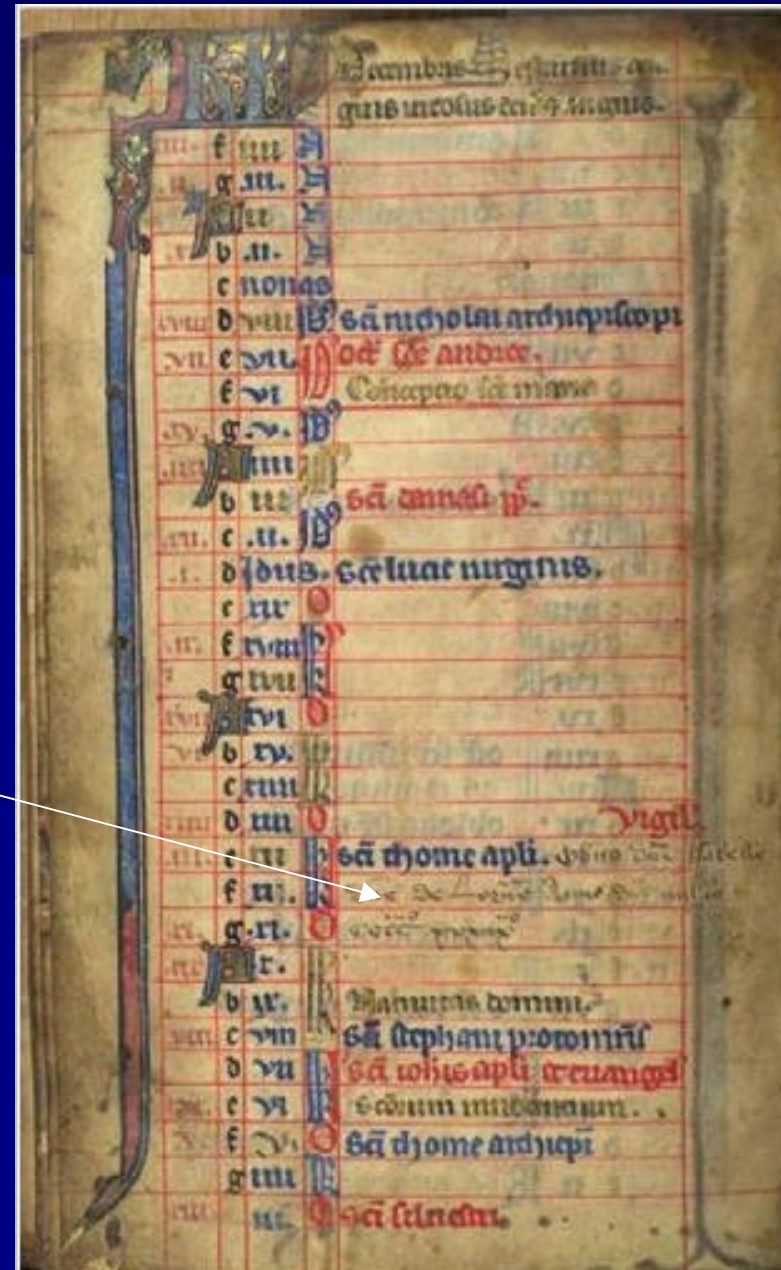
The Kalendar

- The Book of Hours typically contains a Kalendar of major liturgical feasts and important saints' days, sometimes with special regional saints or saints of personal interest to the patron of the book. **Occasionally the death date of family members is also included**.

- Kalendar of the Book of Hours: December. The entry added in the 15th century for 21st December records the date of death of someone whom the owner of the book wished to remember each year, probably a close relative:

  '**Obitus domine Isabelle domine de Lorne Anno domini millesimo ccccmo xxxixmo**'

  (The death of Lady Isabel Lady of Lorne in the year of the Lord 1439).

Kalendar and First Page of St John's Gospel –
A Little more on the books...

- The pages are both printed in black and red, and show the last page of the calendar and the first page of St John's Gospel. The text is surrounded by woodcut borders in the classical style.
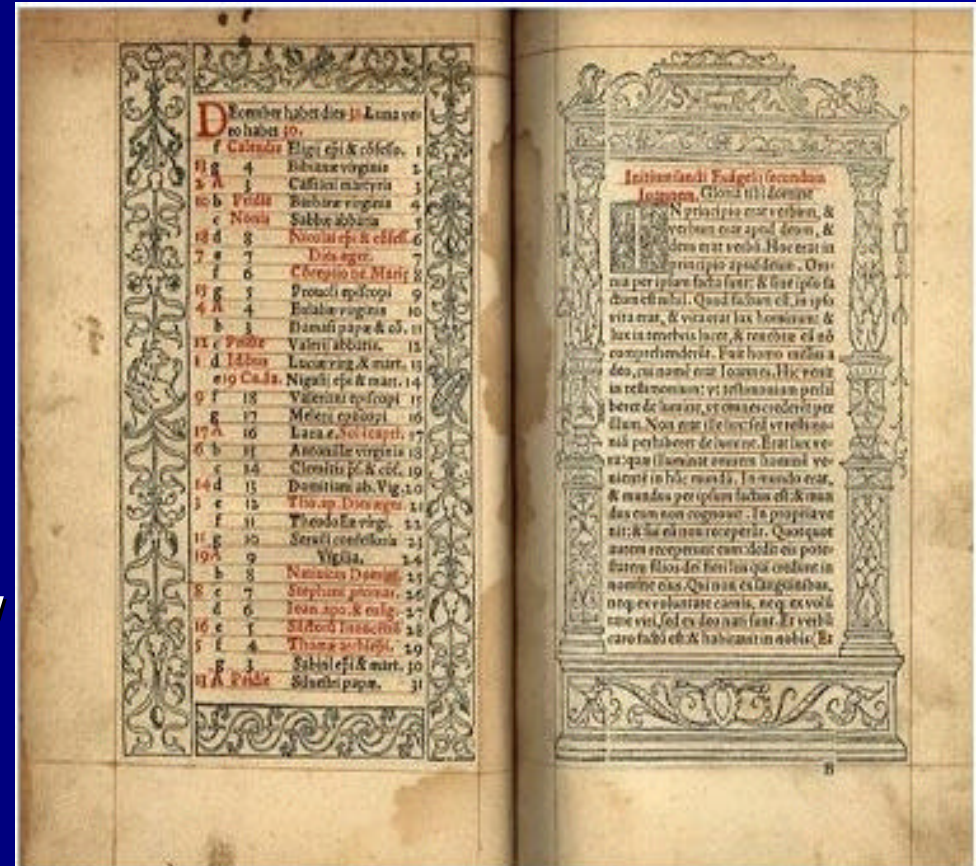
Chantries – *and buying what one could afford*

- From the 14th century the nobility endowed perpetual chantries.
  (A chantry was an endowment to say masses four the souls of the departed.)

- Collegiate churches were endowed for the support of priests whose principal duty was to say masses for the souls of the founders and their families.

- The middling sort subscribed to pious fraternities and nearly everybody provided for trentals (cylces of thirty masses) of or anniversary commemorations.

- The poor paid for single masses wherever they could and this surely demonstrates the conviction of the centrality of caring for their dead.

- Providing the demand was the main or sole activity of a large and increasing number of priests.

St Mary's Collegiate Church, Crail, Scotland

Already a parish church, St Mary's became collegiate in 1543. Collegiate churches had benefactors, in this case Sir Alexander Ogilvie, who supported priests whose principal duty was to say masses for the souls of the founders and their families.

Private Chantry - St Ternan's or Arbuthnott Church

- The aisle of St Ternan's was constructed and endowed by the Arbuthnott family (local landowners) as a private chantry chapel and burial vault.

- It would have been served by a priest whose main duty was to pray for the soul of the founder and his family.

The oldest part of St Ternan's is the chancel which dates to the mid-13th century. The Lady Chapel, now the Arbuthnott Aisle, and the bell tower were built by Robert Arbuthnott in 1500.

Bishop Gavin Dunbar, Aberdeen Cathedral (St Machar's)

- Gavin Dunbar, bishop 1518-32, was buried within the cathedral in the south transept which he founded.

- His tomb, which still exists, probably dates from the late 16th century.

- In 1693, as a result of a religious disturbance, his **effigy** was broken in pieces, the inscription was defaced, and the top of the monument was removed. The existing cornice (along the top of the tomb) was erected shortly afterwards.
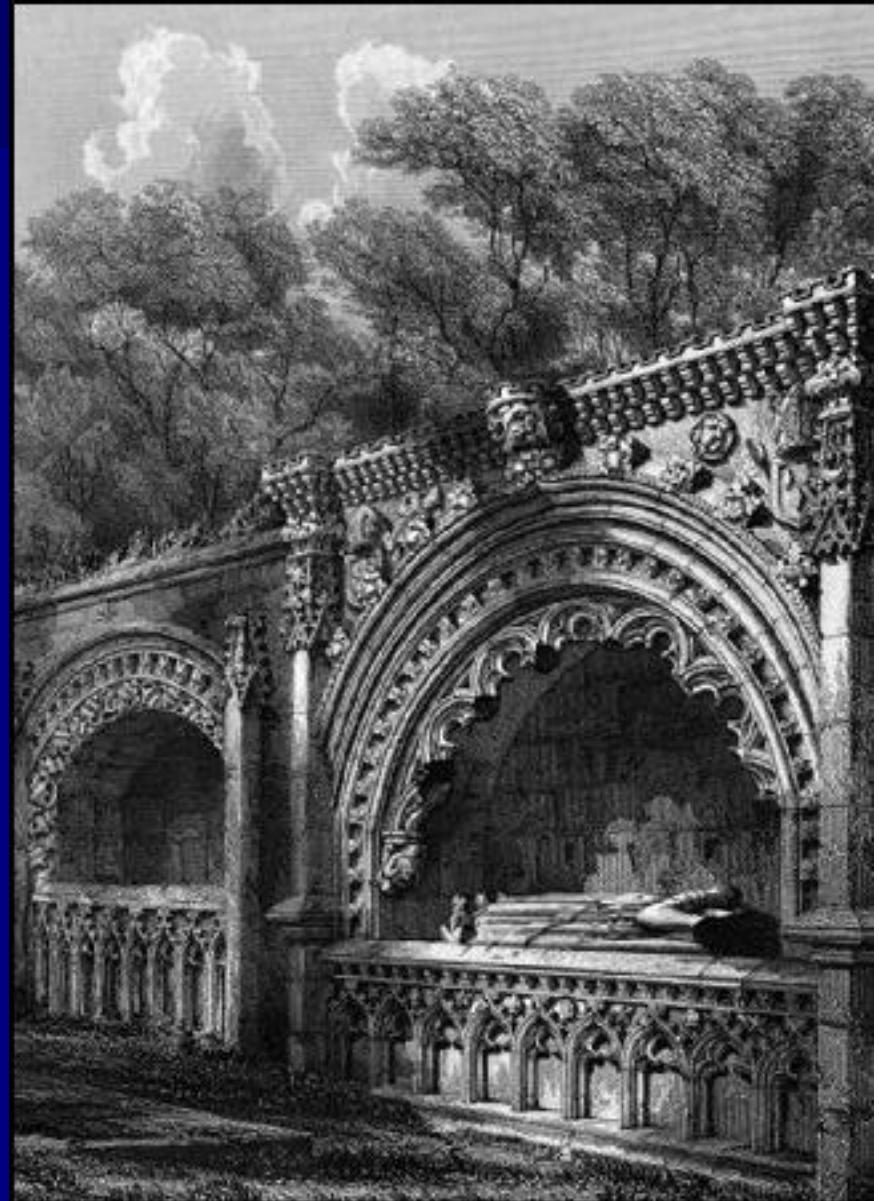
Coat of Arms, St Mary's

- Already a parish church, St Mary's became collegiate in 1543. The benefactor, in this case was Sir Alexander Ogilvie.

- This coat of arms, which is on the south wall of the church, has the initials 'A O' at the top, which represent Alexander Ogilvie, the benefactor. Ogilvie died in 1554 and his ornate tomb is in the chancel of the church.

- It was common for the benefactor not only to be prayed for perpetually but also to leave architectural or structural reminders of his or her founding of the provision.
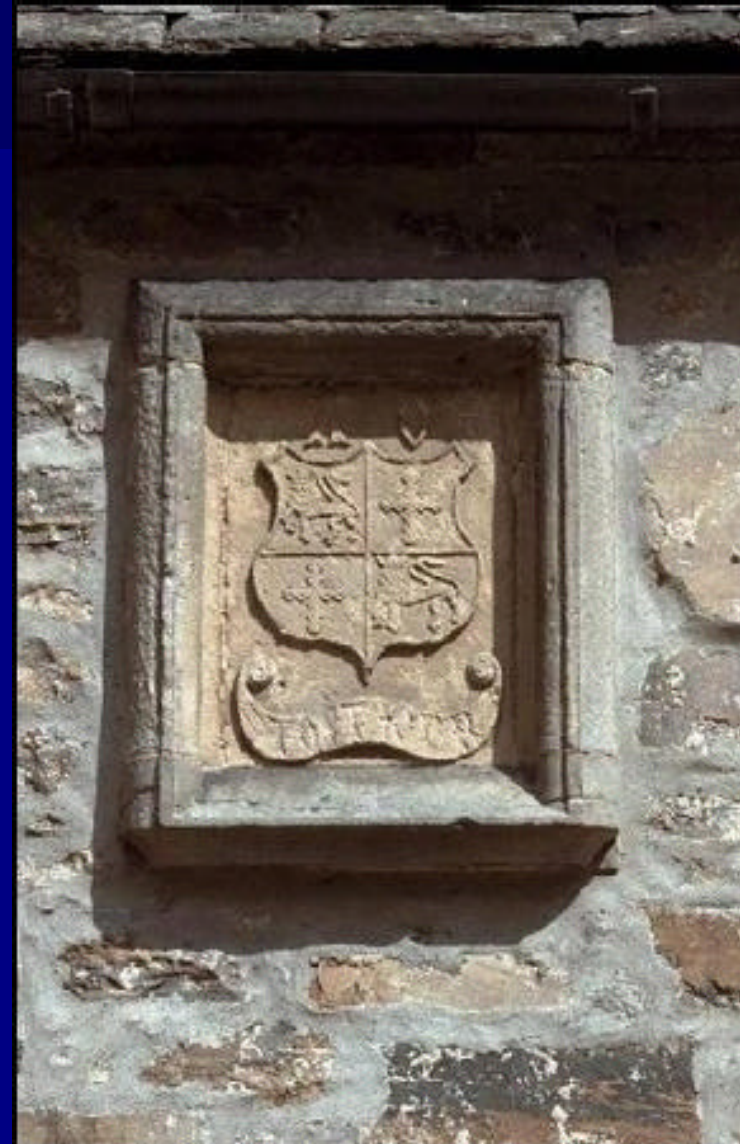
Effigy - *Corstorphine Collegiate Church*

- Corstorphine Old Parish Church dates from the early 15th century, and became a collegiate church, founded in 1429 by Sir John Forrester. It stands, surrounded by its churchyard, in Kirk Loan, at the historic centre of the old village of Corstorphine.

- This **effigy** of Sir John Forrester, the founder of the collegiate church, shows him clad in plate armour with his hands resting on a shield. His wife, lying alongside, wears a wimple and a long robe, with a chain round her neck and rings on each finger.

- Sir John Forrester founded the collegiate church (now the present church) in 1429. The original chapel on the site, built in 1404 by his father, Sir Adam, and later used as a family burial place, was incorporated into the church as the chancel.

Monasteries and Intercession for the dead –
c1400 – Charter to a Monastery Giving Lands

To all who shall see or hear this charter A.B.Knight, lord of C, everlasting greeting to the Lord. Know that for the salvation of the soul and for the salvation of the souls of all my ancestors and successors I have given and by this this my present charter confirmed to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints and also to religious men, the abbot and convent of the monastery of D. serving God there and who shall serve for ever, a certain tenement of mine in the town of E... To hold and to have the same possessed...exacting nothing thence for ever except the favours of devoted prayers... [Formulary of Old Scots legal documents]

Extract taken from formulary of Old Scots Legal Documents ed. P.Gouldesborough. Stair Society 36, Edinburgh (1985) pp 42-3

Burial Rites – Aberdeen Carmelite Friary

- Excavations at Aberdeen Carmelite friary have revealed much about mediaeval death and burial.

- Many people were buried in wooden coffins with iron fittings. Most were buried in a shroud, fastened with small copper pins or twisted wire.

- Very few grave markers were used: the grave of a recently deceased individual was usually cut through earlier graves.

- When this happened the bones which were discovered were laid to the side or put into the new grave.

Saints and Scholars - *an exhibition about the Carmelites, Aberdeen 1989.*

Burial at Aberdeen

- This is an artist's impression of a burial which took place during the life of the Aberdeen Carmelite friary. It is based on evidence found during the excavations at the friary site in 1980-81.

- The graves were dug and the body interred in either a shroud, coffin or both. The shroud would have been fastened with copper alloy pins and green stains from decaying copper have been found on many of the skeletons.
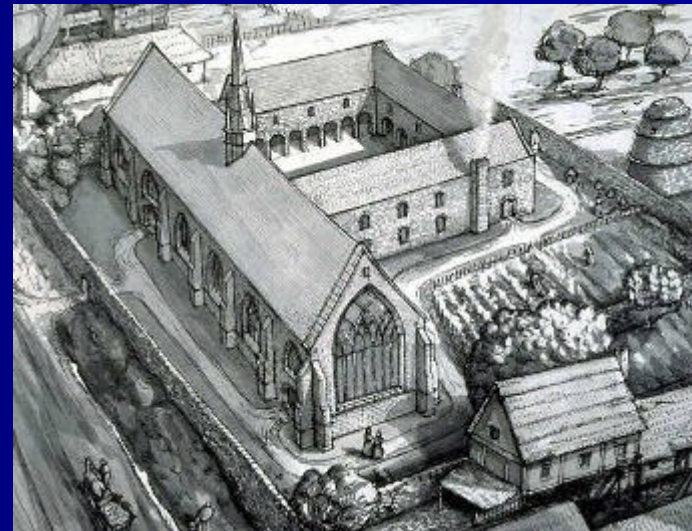
Mort Cloths

- Each church owned at least one mortcloth and used funds from its hire towards poor relief.

- Trade and craft guilds might also own mortcloths, and some co-operative societies were established to help with funeral expenses.

A Mort Box to hold mort cloths

Purgatory

The idea of purgatory had been developing from the early Middle Ages:

- We see three levels of existence in Medieval world:-
- Heaven, Hell and the in-between (purgatory)

- Purgatory was the place where those destined for heaven underwent due punishment for their sins - an evident application of Anselm's <u>Rule of Satisfaction</u>.

- The Church seems to have been following the simple deductions of lay instinct and speculation by defining the doctrine in a steadily more explicit form:

- Council of Lyon 1274
- Florence   1439
- And later at the Council of Trent

All Souls

- All Souls – one of the great festivals – drew strength from an increasing concern about the release from purgatory of those with insufficient living friends to pray and have masses said.

- Evidence for this is seen from activities of the parishes and occasionally in government records.

- On the feast itself, the formal business consisted of a requiem for the souls of the parish, a procession around the churchyard and the blessing of the graves.

- The task of embellishing these rituals was frequently the function of the burial fraternity who might support similar activities throughout the year.

- Bonfires, bells marked the day and the poor would often be fed by the richer of the community. Neither death nor the anniversaries and feasts that followed was an individual event, the entire community was involved at every level.

The Graveyard

- The common-sense view of the graveyard was that the souls of the dead would be where there bodies lay – in the churchyard, suffering from the wet and cold.

- The graveyard possessed its own proper segment of the common territory as the living possessed theirs.

- The grave of 15th century is not a personal but an incredibly public space.

- The dead were models for the living, and death the event for which all prepared. Preparation meant following the traditions and abiding by the precepts of the Church. Those who died without its blessing were left in danger of eternal damnation. Others were condemned to damnation by the Church for failing to live or pay to its required standards.

This is the left wrist of a male skeleton found within the church of the Aberdeen Carmelite friary. The bracelet was the only piece of jewellery found at this site. Most people were buried unadorned.

Graveyard plan –

- The body in a Christian burial is usually laid with its head to the west (as these examples are).

- A small number of skeletons found during this excavation did not have their head to the west, and there are a number of reasons why this might be the case:

  – The body may have been heavily shrouded or in a coffin which was then buried the wrong way around.

  – Priests were sometimes buried with their feet to the west, so that, at the day of judgement, they 'faced' their people.
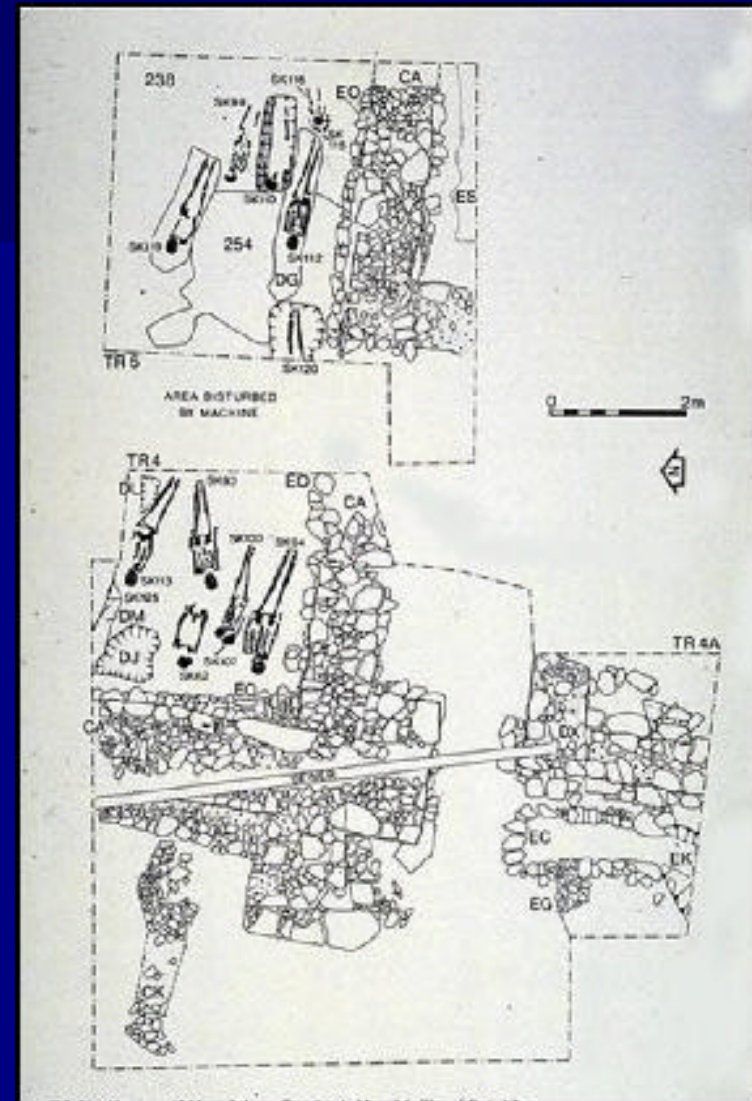
This plan shows the south wall of the Aberdeen Carmelite friary church in the centre of the picture and the west wall bottom left.

Ghosts!

- The dead who were unable to **rest in peace** returned as ghosts.

  Prayers were said to this end:
  Rest eternal grant unto them O Lord, and let Light perpetual shine upon them.

- The traditional ghost was personal - it haunted people and not places. It demanded the fulfilment of obligations towards itself from those whose duty it was to fulfil them.

- A ghost normally required the saying of an adequate number of masses to ensure the salvation of its soul.

- It has been suggested that the late Mediaeval belief in ghosts underlies religious feeling of this time to an extent that it puts them outside Christianity properly speaking.

- Bossy suggests that this overdoes the importance of the matter: and seems an unfaithful description of the frame of mind of most people who here, as in baptism and marriage, were trying to be decent Christians.

- What we observe is that the natural pieties were compatible with, and arguably perhaps even practised as a part of, Christianity.

The Fraternity

- By the 15th century the carrying the body to the church and seeing to its burial would be the task of the parish fraternity dedicated to this charitable purpose.

- The confession, and if relevant the will of the dying, had to include granting of forgiveness and seeking thereof, it was possible for those at enmity with the dying to appear at the death-bed and burial rites to make peace.

The Reformation

- Until, and probably after, the Reformation, death continued to demand collective rites and the notion of family 'property' of the deceased was ineradicable.

- By the Reformation, family memorials accumulated inside churches, under floors, in chapels, on pillars and walls and served as a replacement for the rites the reformers attempted to delete from traditional worship.

- The council of Basel in 1432, complained that incumbents, in search for an honest penny, were sullying the churches and turning them into cemeteries.

- The later dividing up of the churchyard into family allotments was a prospect for the future!

THE END.

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References for Images

Slide No. Title	Reference

- **2**	'Pieta', 1546-1586 by Luis de Morales or El Divino, Spanish School	© Glasgow Museums

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- **9**	Hours of the Virgin, Murthly Hours, Lauds	© National Library of Scotland

- **10**	Calendar, November, Murthly Hours © National Library of Scotland

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- **11**   Page printed from hours with woodcut edges, St John's Gospel (AviiiBi)   © Napier University, Department of PMPC

- **12**   St Mary's Collegiate Church, Crail   © Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

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