

Article

Death Commemoration Strategies in Medieval Portugal: A Mirror of Lay Participation in Religious Parochial Life (The Case of Coimbra)

Maria Amélia Campos 

Center for the History of Society and Culture, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Coimbra, 3000-370 Coimbra, Portugal; melicampos@gmail.com

Abstract: This article will, through the analysis of three parishes in Coimbra between the twelfth and the fourteenth century, investigate practices surrounding the commemoration of death. Through the study of extant wills, post-mortem donations, and necrological documents—such as Obituaries and Anniversary Books—this work seeks to describe the populations and communities who entrusted their final salvation to these churches. This characterization will allow a description of the typology of the suffrage ceremonies founded by these souls, meanwhile presenting an evaluation of the maintenance and management of these foundations by the churches and its chapters throughout the centuries. This paper intends to highlight what survives after death—not only in terms of memory, but also in light of social relationships, interpersonal and familial connections, and professional solidarities. Focusing on a population that is otherwise poorly documented—and moreover, represents a socio-professional background of a low echelon—this text intends to present a global characterization of the cult of the dead, with a further aim of drawing attention to the intervention and enrichment of parish pastoral care by the lay population in this Portuguese city.

Keywords: Middle Ages Portugal; Coimbra urban parishes; death commemoration strategies; urban communities



Citation: Campos, Maria Amélia. 2023. Death Commemoration Strategies in Medieval Portugal: A Mirror of Lay Participation in Religious Parochial Life (The Case of Coimbra). *Religions* 14: 1443. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121443>

Academic Editor: Marina Montesano

Received: 29 September 2023

Revised: 12 November 2023

Accepted: 14 November 2023

Published: 21 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

It is a relatively commonplace concept that, during both the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, the dead shared the daily lives of the living (Harding 2006, p. 46). In comparison to modern society, those who had passed away were nonetheless ‘present’ in the same, vital, communal spaces, being celebrated with continual remembrance in pastoral—their commemoration being the material responsibility of family members, friends, brotherhoods, and both secular and ecclesiastical authorities for multiple generations.

It was the Church’s responsibility, through its various institutions, to safeguard the perpetuity of this memory—and this role certainly guaranteed significant income throughout its ongoing history. This article aims to analyze how this presence was manifested in a medium-sized Portuguese city by characterizing the practices of commemorating the dead in three parishes of Coimbra in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—urban, yet *extramuralhas*: outside the defensive walls of the city. This work is an output of the ongoing investigative project which intends to build a piece of research software with the aim of analyzing the commemorative strategies in medieval urban parishes.¹ This project is focused on enriching the understanding of what survives after death, not only in terms of memory, but also in terms of relationships of sociability, familiarity, and solidarity, within a framework of urban research. This objective is especially relevant because the target is the population from labor groups and urban elite, for which we otherwise do not have abundant or detailed documentary evidence.

This work is not intended to analyze society’s fears of death (Delumeau 1978; Le Goff 1981; Vovelle 1990), or to count and characterize the commemorative foundations, nor