

COLLECTION

Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial

5 texts

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Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter I

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Essay

STROMATA 213

INTRODUCTION

This opening chapter surveys how the world has disposed of its dead - inhumation and cremation traded back and forth across Egyptians, Romans, Jews, Scythians, and early Christians - before Browne turns, characteristically, from custom to conviction. Threaded through the ethnography is a quieter argument: that the manner of burial reveals what a people believed about resurrection, and that Christian burial refuses the fire precisely because the body is owed to dust, not ashes. Browne's prose here is dense with citation and Latinate compounding, more antiquarian catalogue than elegy - the famous meditative turns come later in the work. Readers should expect erudition before feeling, and let the accumulation of examples do its slow work.

Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall or, a Brief Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found In Norfolk

In the deep discovery of the Subterranean world, a shallow part would satisfie some enquirers; who, if two or three yards were open about the surface, would not care to rake the bowels of Potosi, and regions towards the Centre. Nature hath furnished one part of the Earth, and man another. The treasures of time lie high, in Urnes, Coynes, and Monuments, scarce below the roots of some vegetables. Time hath endlesse rarities, and shows of all varieties; which reveals old things in heaven, makes new discoveries in earth, and even earth it self a discovery. That great Antiquity America lay buried for a thousand years; and a large part of the earth is still in the Urne unto us.

Though if Adam were made out of an extract of the Earth, all parts might challenge a restitution, yet few have returned their bones farre lower then they might receive them; not affecting the graves of Giants, under hilly and heavy coverings, but content with lesse then their owne depth, have wished their bones might lie soft, and the earth be light upon them; Even such as hope to rise again, would not be content with centrall interment, or so desperately to place their reliques as to lie beyond discovery, and in no way to be seen again; which happy contrivance hath made communication with our forefathers, and left unto our view some parts, which they never beheld themselves.

Though earth hath engrossed the name yet water hath proved the smartest grave; which in forty dayes swallowed almost mankinde, and the living creation; Fishes not wholly escaping, except the Salt Ocean were handsomely contempered by a mixture of the fresh Element.

Many have taken voluminous pains to determine the state of the soul upon disunion; but men have been most phantasticall in the singular contrivances of their corporall dissolution: whilst the sobrest Nations have rested in two wayes, of simple inhumation and burning.

That carnall interment or burying, was of the elder date, the old examples of Abraham and the Patriarchs are sufficient to illustrate; And were without competition, if it could be made out, that Adam was buried near Damascus, or Mount Calvary, according to some Tradition. God himself, that buried but one, was pleased to make choice of this way, collectible from Scripture-expression, and the hot contest between Satan and the Arch-Angel, about discovering the body of Moses. But the practice of Burning was also of great Antiquity, and of no slender extent. For (not to derive the same from Hercules) noble descriptions there are hereof in the Grecian Funerals of Homer, In the formall Obsequies of Patrocles, and Achilles; and somewhat elder in the Theban warre, and solemn combustion of Meneceus, and Archemorus, contemporary unto Jair the Eighth Judge of Israel. Confirmable also among the Trojans, from the Funerall Pyre of Hector, burnt before the gates of Troy, And the burning of Penthisilea the Amazonean Queen: and long continuance of that practice, in the inward Countries of Asia; while as low as the Reign of Julian, we finde that the King of Chionia burnt the body of his Son, and interred the ashes in a silver Urne.

The same practice extended also farre West, and besides Herulians, Getes, and Thracians, was in use with most of the Celtæ, Sarmatians, Germans, Gauls, Danes, Swedes, Norwegians; not to omit some use thereof among Carthaginians and Americans: Of greater Antiquity among the Romans then most opinion, or Pliny seems to allow. For (beside the old Table Laws of burning or burying within the City, of making the Funerall fire with plained wood, or quenching the fire with wine.) Manlius the Consul burnt the body of his Son: Numa by speciall clause of his Will, was not burnt but buried; and Remus was solemnly burned, according to the description of Ovid.

Cornelius Sylla was not the first whose body was burned in Rome, but of the Cornelian Family, which being indifferently, not frequently used before; from that time spread, and became the prevalent practice. Not totally pursued in the highest runne of Cremation; For when even Crows were funerally burnt, Poppæa the Wife of Nero found a peculiar grave enterment. Now as all customes were founded upon some bottome of Reason, so there wanted not grounds for this; according to severall apprehensions of the most rationall dissolution. Some being of the opinion of Thales, that water was the originall of all things, thought it most equall to submit unto the principle of putrefaction, and conclude in a moist relentment. Others conceived it most natural to end in fire, as due unto the master principle in the composition, according to the doctrine of Heraclitus. And therefore heaped up large piles, more actively to waft them toward that Element, whereby they also declined a visible degeneration into worms, and left a lasting parcell of their composition.

Some apprehended a purifying virtue in fire, refining the grosser commixture, and firing out the Æthereall particles so deeply immersed in it. And such as by tradition or rationall conjecture held any hint of the finall pyre of all things; or that this Element at last must be too hard for all the rest; might conceive most naturally of the fiery dissolution. Others pretending no natural grounds, politickly declined the malice of enemies upon their buried bodies. Which consideration led Sylla unto this practise; who

having thus served the body of Marius, could not but fear a retaliation upon his own; entertained after in the Civill wars, and revengeful contentions of Rome.

But as many Nations embraced, and many left it indifferent, so others too much affected, or strictly declined this practice. The Indian Brachmans seemed too great friends unto fire, who burnt themselves alive, and thought it the noblest way to end their dayes in fire; according to the expression of the Indian, burning himself at Athens, in his last words upon the pyre unto the amazed spectators, Thus I make my selfe Immortall.

But the Chaldeans the great Idolators of fire, abhorred the burning of their carcasses, as a pollution of that Deity. The Persian Magi declined it upon the like scruple, and being only sollicitous about their bones, exposed their flesh to the prey of Birds and Dogges. And the Persees now in India, which expose their bodies unto Vultures, and endure not so much as feretra or Beers of Wood, the proper Fuell of fire, are led on with such niceties. But whether the ancient Germans who burned their dead, held any such fear to pollute their Deity of Herthus, or the earth, we have no Authentick conjecture.

The Ægyptians were afraid of fire, not as a Deity, but a devouring Element, mercilessly consuming their bodies, and leaving too little of them; and therefore by precious Embalmments, depositure in dry earths, or handsome inclosure in glasses, contrived the notablest wayes of integrall conservation. And from such Ægyptian scruples imbibed by Pythagoras, it may be conjectured that Numa and the Pythagoricall Sect first waved the fiery solution.

The Scythians who swore by winde and sword, that is, by life and death, were so farre from burning their bodies, that they declined all interrment, and made their graves in the ayr: And the Ichthyophagi or fish-eating Nations about Ægypt, affected the Sea for their grave: Thereby declining visible corruption, and restoring the debt of their bodies. Whereas the old Heroes in Homer, dreaded nothing more than water or drowning; probably upon the old opinion of the fiery substance of the soul, only extinguishable by that Element; And therefore the Poet emphatically implieth the totall destruction in this kinde of death, which happened to Ajax Oileus.

The old Balearians had a peculiar mode, for they used great Urnes and much wood, but no fire in their burials, while they bruised the flesh and bones of the dead, crowded them into Urnes, and laid heapes of wood upon them. And the Chinois without cremation or urnall interrment of their bodies, make use of trees and much burning, while they plant a Pine-tree by their grave, and burn great numbers of printed draughts of slaves and horses over it, civilly content with their companies in effigie, which barbarous Nations exact unto reality. Christians abhorred this way of obsequies, and though they stickt not to give their bodies to be burnt in their lives, detested that mode after death; affecting rather a depositure than absumption, and properly submitting unto the sentence of God, to return not unto ashes but unto dust againe, conformable unto the practice of the Patriarchs, the interrment of our Saviour, of Peter, Paul, and the ancient Martyrs. And so farre at last declining promiscuous enterrment with Pagans, that some have suffered Ecclesiastical censures, for making no scruple thereof.

The Musselman beleivers will never admit this fiery resolution. For they hold a present trial from their black and white Angels in the grave; which they must have made so hollow, that they may rise upon their knees.

The Jewish Nation, though they entertained the old way of inhumation, yet sometimes admitted this practice. For the men of Jabesh burnt the body of Saul. And by no prohibited practice to avoid contagion or pollution, in time of pestilence, burnt the bodies of their friends. And when they burnt not their dead bodies, yet sometimes used great burnings neare and about them, deducible from the expressions concerning Jehoram, Sedechias, and the sumptuous pyre of Asa: And were so little averse from Pagan burning, that the Jews lamenting the death of Cæsar their friend, and revenger on Pompey, frequented the place where his body was burnt for many nights together. And as they raised noble Monuments and Mausolæums for their own Nation, so they were not scrupulous in erecting some for others, according to the practice of Daniel, who left that lasting sepulchrall pyre in Echbatana, for the Medean and Persian Kings.

But even in times of subjection and hottest use, they conformed not unto the Romane practice of burning; whereby the Prophecy was secured concerning the body of Christ, that it should not see corruption, or a bone should not be broken; which we beleieve was also providentially prevented, from the Souldiers spear and nails that past by the little bones both in his hands and feet: Not of ordinary contrivance, that it should not corrupt on the Crosse, according to the Laws of Romane Crucifixion, or an hair of his head perish, though observable in Jewish customes, to cut the hairs of Malefactors.

Nor in their long co-habitation with Ægyptians, crept into a custome of their exact embalming, wherein deeply slashing the muscles, and taking out the brains and entrails, they had broken the subject of so entire a Resurrection, nor fully answered the types of Enoch, Eliah, or Jonah, which yet to prevent or restore, was of equall facility unto that rising power, able to break the fasciations and bands of death, to get clear out of the Cere-cloth, and an hundred pounds of oyntment, and out of the Sepulchre before the stone was rolled from it.

But though they embraced not this practice of burning, yet entertained they many ceremonies agreeable unto Greeke and Romane obsequies. And he that observeth their funerall Feasts, their Lamentations at the grave, their musick, and weeping mourners; how they closed the eyes of their friends, how they washed, anointed, and kissed the dead; may easily conclude these were not meere Pagan-Civilities. But whether that mournfull burthen, and treble calling out after Absalom, had any reference unto the last conclamation, and triple valediction, used by other Nations, we hold but a wavering conjecture.

Civilians make sepulture but of the Law of Nations, others doe naturally found it and discover it also in animals. They that are so thick skinned as still to credit the story of the Phoenix, may say something for animall burning: More serious conjectures finde some examples of sepulture in Elephants, Cranes, the Sepulchrall Cells of Pismires and practice of Bees; which civill society carrieth out their dead, and hath exequies, if not interrments.

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658), Chapter I.

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Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter II

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

STROMATA 214

INTRODUCTION

In this second chapter, Browne turns antiquarian, tracing the Norfolk urns unearthed near Walsingham back through Roman garrisons, British tribes, and Danish invaders in search of whose hands buried them and why. He moves briefly from meditation into method - coins, combs, brass nippers, an opal still holding its blue - cataloguing the small dear things the dead were sent off with. The prose is dense with proper names and conjecture, more antiquary's notebook than sermon, yet the same undertone of Chapter I persists beneath the scholarship: these were people, and burning did not erase what mattered to them.

The Solemnities, Ceremonies, Rites of their Cremation or enterrment, so solemnly delivered by Authors, we shall not disparage our Reader to repeat. Only the last and lasting part in their Urns, collected bones and Ashes, we cannot wholly omit, or decline that Subject, which occasion lately presented, in some discovered among us.

In a Field of old Walsingham, not many moneths past, were digged up between fourty and fifty Urnes, deposited in a dry and sandy soile, not a yard deep, nor farre from one another: Not all strictly of one figure, but most answering these described: Some containing two pounds of bones, distinguishable in skulls, ribs, jawes, thigh-bones, and teeth, with fresh impressions of their combustion. Besides the extraneous substances, like peeces of small boxes, or combs handsomely wrought, handles of small brasse instruments, brazen nippers, and in one some kind of Opale.

Near the same plot of ground, for about six yards compasse were digged up coals and incinerated substances, which begat conjecture that this was the Ustrina or place of burning their bodies, or some sacrificing place unto the Manes, which was properly below the surface of the ground, as the Aræ and Altars unto the gods and Heroes above it.

That these were the Urnes of Romanes from the common custome and place where they were found, is no obscure conjecture, not farre from a Romane Garrison, and but five Miles from Brancaster, set down by ancient Record under the name of Brannodunum. And where the adjoyning Towne, containing seven Parishes, in no very different sound, but Saxon Termination, still retains the Name of Burnham, which being an early station, it is not improbable the neighbour parts were filled with habitations, either of Romanes themselves, or Brittaines Romanised, which observed the Romane customs.

Nor is it improbable that the Romanes early possessed this Countrey; for though we meet not with such strict particulars of these parts, before the new Institution of Constantine, and military charge of the Count of the Saxon shore, and that about the Saxon Invasions, the Dalmatian Horsemen were in the Garrison of Brancaster: Yet in the time of Claudius, Vespasian, and Severus, we finde no lesse then three Legions dispersed through the Province of Brittain. And as high as the Reign of Claudius a great overthrow was given unto the Icenī, by the Romane Lieutenant Ostorius. Not long after the Countrey was so molested, that in hope of a better state, Prastaagus bequeathed his Kingdome unto Nero and his Daughters; and Boadicea his Queen fought the last decisive Battle with Paulinus. After which time and Conquest of Agricola the Lieutenant of Vespasian, probable it is they wholly possessed this Countrey, ordering it into Garrisons or Habitations, best suitable with their securities. And so some Romane Habitations, not improbable in these parts, as high as the time of Vespasian, where the Saxons after seated, in whose thin-fill'd Mappes we yet finde the Name of Walsingham. Now if the Icenī were but Gammadims, Anconians, or men that lived in an Angle wedge or Elbow of Brittain, according to the Originall Etymologie, this countrey will challenge the Emphaticall appellation, as most properly making the Elbow or Iken of Icenia.

That Britain was notably populous is undeniable, from that expression of Cæsar. That the Romans themselves were early in no small Numbers, Seventy Thousand with their associats slain by Boadicea, affords a sure account. And though many Roman habitations are now unknowne, yet some by old works, Rampiers, Coynes, and Urnes doe testifie their Possessions. Some Urnes have been found at Castor, some also about Southcreake, and not many years past, no lesse then ten in a Field at Buxton, not near any recorded Garison. Nor is it strange to finde Romane Coynes of Copper and Silver among us; of Vespasian, Trajan, Adrian, Commodus, Antoninus, Severus, &c. But the greater number of Dioclesian, Constantine, Constans, Valens, with many of Victorinus Posthumius, Tetricus, and the Thirty Tyrants in the Reigne of Gallienus; and some as high as Adrianus have been found about Thetford, or Sitomagus, mentioned in the itinerary of Antoninus, as the way from Venta or Castor unto London. But the most frequent discovery is made at the two Casters by Norwich and Yarmouth, at Burghcastle and Brancaster.

Besides, the Norman, Saxon and Danish peeces of Cuthred, Canutus, William Matilda, and others, som Brittish Coynes of gold have been dispersedly found; And no small number of silver peeces near Norwich; with a rude head upon the obverse, and an ill formed horse on the reverse, with Inscriptions Ic. Duro. T. whether implying Icenī, Dutotriges, Tascia, or Trinobantes, we leave to higher conjecture. Vulgar Chronology will have Norwich Castle as old as Julius Cæsar; but his distance from these parts, and its Gothick form of structure, abridgeth such Antiquity. The British Coyns afford conjecture of early habitation in these parts, though the City of Norwich arose from the ruines of Venta, and though perhaps not without some habitation before, was enlarged, builded, and nominated by the Saxons. In what bulk or populosity it stood in the old East-angle Monarchy, tradition and history are silent. Considerable it was in the Danish Eruptions, when Sueno burnt Thetford and Norwich, and Ulfketel the Governour thereof, was able to make some resistance, and after endeavoured to burn the Danish Navy.

How the Romanes left so many Coynes in Countreys of their Conquests, seems of hard resolution, except we consider how they buried them under ground, when upon barbarous invasions they were fain to desert their habitations in most part of their Empire, and the strictnesse of their laws forbidding to

transfer them to any other uses; Wherein the Spartans were singular, who to make their Copper money uselesse, tempered it with vinegar. That the Brittaines left any, some wonder; since their money was iron, and Iron rings before Cæsar; and those of after stamp by permission, and but small in bulk and bignesse; that so few of the Saxons remain, because overcome by succeeding Conquerors upon the place, their Coyne by degrees passed into other stamps, and the marks of after ages. Then the time of these Urnes deposited, or precise Antiquity of these Reliques, nothing of more uncertainty. For since the Lieutenant of Claudius seems to have made the first progresse into these parts, since Boadicea was overthrown by the Forces of Nero, and Agricola put a full end to these Conquests; it is not probable the Countrey was fully garrison'd or planted before; and therefore however these Urnes might be of later date, not likely of higher Antiquity. And the succeeding Emperours desisted not from their Conquests in these and other parts; as testified by history and medall inscription yet extant. The Province of Brittain in so divided a distance from Rome, beholding the faces of many Imperiall persons, and in large account no fewer then Cæsar, Claudius, Britannicus, Vespasian, Titus, Adrian, Severus, Commodus, Geta, and Caracalla. A great obscurity herein, because no medall or Emperours Coyne enclosed, which might denote the date of their enterrments. Observable in many Urnes, and found in those of Spittle Fields by London, which contained the Coyne of Claudius, Vespasian, Commodus, Antoninus, attended with Lacrymatories, Lamps, Bottles of Liquor, and other appurtenances of affectionate superstition, which in these rurall interments were wanting.

Some uncertainty there is from the period or term of burning, or the cessation of that practice. Macrobius affirmeth it was disused in his dayes. But most agree, though without authentick record, that it ceased with the Antonini. Most safely to be understood after the Reigne of those Emperours, which assumed the name of Antoninus, extending unto Heliogabalus. Not strictly after Marcus; For about fifty years later we finde the magnificent burning, and consecration of Severus; and if we so fix this period or cessation, these Urnes will challenge above thirteen hundred years.

But whether this practise was onely then left by Emperours and great persons, or generally about Rome, and not in other Provinces, we hold no authentick account. For after Tertullian, in the dayes of Minucius it was obviously objected upon Christians, that they condemned the practice of burning. And we finde a passage in Sidonius, which asserteth that practise in France unto a lower account. And perhaps not fully disused till Christianity fully established, which gave the finall extinction of these sepulchrall Bonfires.

Whether they were the bones of men or women or children, no authentick decision from ancient custome in distinct places of buriall. Although not improbably conjectured, that the double Sepulture or burying place of Abraham, had in it such intension. But from exility of bones, thinnesse of skulls, smallnesse of teeth, ribbes, and thigh-bones; not improbable that many thereof were persons of minor age, or women. Confirmable also from things contained in them: In most were found substances resembling Combes, Plates like Boxes, fastened with Iron pins, and handsomely overwrought like the necks or Bridges of Muscull Instruments, long brasse plates overwrought like the handles of neat implements, brazen nippers to pull away hair, and in one a kinde of Opale yet maintaining a blewish colour.

Now that they accustomed to burn or bury with them, things wherein they excelled, delighted, or which were dear unto them, either as farewells unto all pleasure, or vain apprehension that they might use them in the other world, is testified by all Antiquity. Observable from the Gemme or Berill Ring upon the finger of Cynthia, the Mistresse of Propertius, when after her Funerall Pyre her Ghost appeared unto him. And notably illustrated from the Contents of that Romane Urne preserved by Cardinall Farnese, wherein besides great number of Gemmes with heads of Gods and Goddesses, were found an Ape of Agath, a Grashopper, an Elephant of Ambre, a Crystall Ball, three glasses, two Spoones, and six Nuts of Crystall. And beyond the content of Urnes, in the Monument of Childerick the first, and fourth King from Pharamond, casually discovered three years past at Tournay, restoring unto the world much gold richly adorning his Sword, two hundred Rubies, many hundred Imperial Coyns, three hundred golden Bees, the bones and horseshoe of his horse enterred with him, according to the barbarous magnificence of those days in their sepulchral Obsequies. Although if we steer by the conjecture of many and Septuagint expression; some trace thereof may be found even with the ancient Hebrews, not only from the Sepulcrall treasure of David, but the circumcision knives which Joshua also buried. Some men considering the contents of these Urnes, lasting peeces and toyes included in them, and the custome of burning with many other Nations, might somewhat doubt whether all Urnes found among us, were properly Romane Reliques, or some not belonging unto our British, Saxon, or Danish Forefathers. In the form of Buriall among the ancient Brittaines, the large Discourses of Cæsar, Tacitus, and Strabo are silent: For the discovery whereof, with other particulars, we much deplore the loss of that Letter which Cicero expected or received from his Brother Quintus, as a resolution of Brittainish customes; or the account which might have been made by Scribonius Largus the Physician, accompanying the Emperour Claudius, who might have also discovered that frugall Bit of the Old Brittaines, which in the bignesse of a Bean could satisfy their thirst and hunger.

But that the Druids and ruling Priests used to burn and bury, is expressed by Pomponius; That Bellinus the Brother of Brennus, and King of Brittaines was burnt, is acknowledged by Polydorus, as also by Amandus Zierexensis in Historia, and Pineda in his *Universa historia*. Spanish. That they held that practise in Gallia, Cæsar expresly delivereth. Whether the Brittaines probably descended from them, of like Religion, Language and Manners did not sometimes make use of burning; or whether at least such as were after civilized unto the Romane life and manners, conformed not unto this practise, we have no historicall assertion or deniall. But since from the account of Tacitus the Romanes early wrought so much civility upon the Brittainish stock, that they brought them to build Temples, to wear the Gowne, and study the Romane Laws and language, that they conformed also unto their religious rites and customes in burials, seems no improbable conjecture.

That burning the dead was used in Sarmatia, is affirmed by Gaguinus, that the Sueons and Gothlanders used to burne their Princes and great persons, is delivered by Saxo and Olaus; that this was the olde Germane practise, is also asserted by Tacitus. And though we are bare in historicall particulars of such obsequies in this Island, or that the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles burnt their dead, yet came they from parts where 'twas of ancient practise; the Germanes using it, from whom they were descended. And even in Jutland and Sleswick in Anglia Cymbrica, Urnes with bones were found not many years before us. But the Danish and Northern Nations have raised an Æra or point of compute from their Custome

of burning their dead: Some deriving it from Unguinus, some from Frotho the great; who ordained by Law, that Princes and Chief Commanders should be committed unto the fire, though the common sort had the common grave enterrment. So Starkatterus that old Heroe was burnt, and Ringo royally burnt the body of Harald the King slain by him.

What time this custome generally expired in that Nation, we discern no assured period; whether it ceased before Christianity, or upon their Conversion, by Ausgurius the Gaul in the time of Ludovicus Pius the Sonne of Charles the great, according to good computes; or whether it might not be used by some persons, while for a hundred and eighty years Paganisme and Christianity were promiscuously embraced among them, there is no assured conclusion. About which times the Danes were busie in England, and particularly infested this Countrey: Where many Castles and strong holds, were built by them, or against them, and great number of names and Families still derived from them. But since this custome was probably disused before their Invasion or Conquest, and the Romanes confessedly practised the same, since their possession of this Island, the most assured account will fall upon the Romanes, or Brittaines Romanized.

However certain it is, that Urnes conceived of no Romane Originall, are often digged up both in Norway, and Denmark, handsomely described, and graphically represented by the Learned Physician Wormius, And in some parts of Denmark in no ordinary number, as stands delivered by Authours exactly describing those Countreys. And they contained not only bones, but many other substances in them, as Knives, peeces of Iron, Brasse and Wood, and one of Norwaye a brasse gilded Jewes-harp.

Nor were they confused or carelesse in disposing the noblest sort, while they placed large stones in circle about the Urnes, or bodies which they interred: Somewhat answerable unto the Monument of Rollrich stones in England, or sepulcrall Monument probably erected by Rollo, who after conquered Normandy. Where 'tis not improbable somewhat might be discovered. Mean while to what Nation or person belonged that large Urne found at Ashburie, containing mighty bones, and a Buckler; What those large Urnes found at little Massingham, or why the Angelsea Urnes are placed with their mouths downward, remains yet undiscovered.

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658), Chapter II.

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Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter III

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

STROMATA 215

INTRODUCTION

Chapter III turns from the moment of discovery to the urns themselves - their clay, their colors, what they held, how they were sealed, and what small things (a ring, a coal, a sprig of bay) survived the fire alongside the bones. Browne catalogues these details with the patience of an antiquarian, but the cataloguing keeps sliding toward larger questions: how much of a body a handful of ashes can hold, how burial customs across pagan and Christian ages tried to say something true about what remains. By its close the chapter has moved, almost without announcing itself, from urns and coverings to the resurrection of the dead - the argument this whole meditation has been quietly building toward.

Playstered and whited Sepulchres, were anciently affected in cadaverous, and corruptive Burials; And the rigid Jews were wont to garnish the Sepulchres of the righteous; Ulysses in Hecuba cared not how meanly he lived, so he might finde a noble Tomb after death. Great Princes affected great Monuments, And the fair and larger Urnes contained no vulgar ashes, which makes that disparity in those which time discovereth among us. The present Urnes were not of one capacity, the largest containing above a gallon, Some not much above half that measure; nor all of one figure, wherein there is no strict conformity, in the same or different Countreys; Observable from those represented by Casalius, Bosio, and others, though all found in Italy. While many have handles, ears, and long necks, but most imitate a circular figure, in a sphericall and round composure; whether from any mystery, best duration or capacity, were but a conjecture. But the common form with necks was a proper figure, making our last bed like our first; nor much unlike the Urnes of our Nativity, while we lay in the nether part of the Earth, and inward vault of our Microcosme. Many Urnes are red, these but of a black colour, somewhat smooth, and dully sounding, which begat some doubt, whether they were burnt, or only baked in Oven or Sunne: According to the ancient way, in many bricks, tiles, pots, and testaceous works; and as the word testa is properly to be taken, when occurring without addition: And chiefly intended by Pliny, when he commendeth bricks and tiles of two years old, and to make them in the spring. Nor only these concealed peeces, but the open magnificence of Antiquity, ran much in the Artifice of Clay. Hereof the house of Mausolus was built, thus old Jupiter stood in the Capitoll, and the Statua of Hercules made in the Reign of Tarquinius Priscus, was extant in Plinies dayes. And such as declined burning or Funerall Urnes, affected Coffins of Clay, according to the mode of Pythagoras, a way preferred by Varro. But the spirit of great ones was above these circumscriptions, affecting copper, silver, gold, and Porphyrie Urnes, wherein Severus lay, after a serious view and sentence on that which should contain him. Some of these Urnes were thought to have been silvered over, from sparklings in several pots,

with small Tinsell parcels; uncertain whether from the earth, or the first mixture in them. Among these Urnes we could obtain no good account of their coverings; Only one seemed arched over with some kinde of brickwork. Of those found at Buxton some were covered with flints, some in other parts with tiles, those at Yarmouth Caster, were closed with Romane bricks. And some have proper earthen covers adapted and fitted to them. But in the Homericall Urne of Patroclus, whatever was the solid Tegument, we finde the immediate covering to be a purple peece of silk: And such as had no covers might have the earth closely pressed into them, after which disposure were probably some of these, wherein we found the bones and ashes half mortered unto the sand and sides of the Urne; and some long roots of Quich, or Dogs-grass wreathed about the bones.

No Lamps, included Liquors, Lachrymatories, or Tear-bottles attended these rurall Urnes, either as sacred unto the Manes, or passionate expressions of their surviving friends. While with rich flames, and hired tears they solemnized their Obsequies, and in the most lamented Monuments made one part of their Inscriptions. Some finde sepulchrall Vessels containing liquors, which time hath incrassated into gellies. For besides these Lachrymatories, notable Lamps, with Vessels of Oyles and Aromaticall Liquors attended noble Ossuaries. And some yet retaining a Vinosity and spirit in them, which if any have tasted they have farre exceeded the Palats of Antiquity. Liquors not to be computed by years of annuall Magistrates, but by great conjunctions and the fatall periods of Kingdomes. The draughts of Consulary date, were but crude unto these, and Opimian Wine but in the must unto them.

In sundry Graves and Sepulchres, we meet with Rings, Coynes, and Chalicees; Ancient frugality was so severe, that they allowed no gold to attend the Corps, but only that which served to fasten their teeth. Whether the Opaline stone in this Urne were burnt upon the finger of the dead, or cast into the fire by some affectionate friend, it will consist with either custome. But other incinerable substances were found so fresh, that they could feel no sindge from fire. These upon view were judged to be wood, but sinking in water and tried by the fire, we found them to be bone or Ivory. In their hardnesse and yellow colour they most resembled Box, which in old expressions found the Epithete of Eternall, and perhaps in such conservatories might have passed uncorrupted.

That Bay-leaves were found green in the Tomb of S. Humbert, after an hundred and fifty years, was looked upon as miraculous. Remarkable it was unto old Spectators, that the Cypresse of the Temple of Diana, lasted so many hundred years: The wood of the Ark and Olive Rod of Aaron were older at the Captivity. But the Cypresse of the Ark of Noah, was the greatest vegetable Antiquity, if Josephus were not deceived, by some fragments of it in his dayes. To omit the Moore-logs, and Firre-trees found under-ground in many parts of England; the undated ruines of windes, flouds or earthquakes; and which in Flanders still shew from what quarter they fell, as generally lying in a North-East position. But though we found not these peeces to be Wood, according to first apprehension, yet we missed not altogether of some woody substance; For the bones were not so clearly pickt, but some coals were found amongst them; A way to make wood perpetuall, and a fit associat for metall, whereon was laid the foundation of the great Ephesian Temple, and which were made the lasting tests of old boundaries and Landmarks; Whilest we look on these, we admire not Observations of Coals found fresh, after four hundred years. In a long deserted habitation, even Egge-shells have been found fresh, not tending to corruption. In the Monument of King Childerick, the Iron Reliques were found all rusty and crumbling into peeces. But

our little Iron pins which fastened the Ivory works, held well together, and lost not their Magneticall quality, though wanting a tenacious moisture for the firmer union of parts, although it be hardly drawn into fusion, yet that metall soon submitteth unto rust and dissolution. In the brazen peeces we admired not the duration but the freedome from rust, and ill savour; upon the hardest attrition, but now exposed unto the piercing Atomes of ayre; in the space of a few moneths, they begin to spot and betray their green entrals. We conceive not these Urnes to have descended thus naked as they appear, or to have entred their grave without the old habit of flowers. The Urne of Philopœmen was so laden with flowers and ribbons, that it afforded no sight of it self. The rigid Lycurgus allowed Olive and Myrtle. The Athenians might fairly except against the practise of Democritus to be buried up in honey; as fearing to embezzle a great commodity of their Countrey, and the best of that kinde in Europe. But Plato seemed too frugally politick, who allowed no larger Monument then would contain four Heroick Verses, and designed the most barren ground for sepulture: Though we cannot commend the goodnesse of that sepulchrall ground, which was set at no higher rate then the mean salary of Judas. Though the earth had confounded the ashes of these Ossuaries, yet the bones were so smartly burnt, that some thin plates of brasse were found half melted among them: whereby we apprehend they were not of the meanest carcasses, perfunctorily fired as sometimes in military, and commonly in pestilence, burnings; or after the manner of abject corps, hudled forth and carelesly burnt, without the Esquiline Port at Rome; which was an affront continued upon Tiberius, while they but half burnt his body, and in the Amphitheatre, according to the custome in notable Malefactors; whereas Nero seemed not so much to feare his death, as that his head should be cut off, and his body not burnt entire.

Some finding many fragments of sculs in these Urnes, suspected a mixture of bones; In none we searched was there cause of such conjecture, though sometimes they declined not that practise; The ashes of Domitian were mingled with those of Julia, of Achilles with those of Patroclus: All Urnes contained not single ashes; Without confused burnings they affectionately compounded their bones; passionately endeavouring to continue their living Unions. And when distance of death denied such conjunctions, unsatisfied affections, conceived some satisfaction to be neighbours in the grave, to lye Urne by Urne, and touch but in their names. And many were so curious to continue their living relations, that they contrived large, and family Urnes, wherein the Ashes of their nearest friends and kindred might successively be received, at least some parcels thereof, while their collaterall memorials lay in minor vessels about them. Antiquity held too light thoughts from Objects of mortality, while some drew provocatives of mirth from Anatomies, and Juglers shewed tricks with Skeletons. When Fidlers made not so pleasant mirth as Fencers, and men could sit with quiet stomacks while hanging was plaied before them. Old considerations made few memento's by sculs and bones upon their monuments. In the Ægyptian Obelisks and Hieroglyphicall figures, it is not easie to meet with bones. The sepulchrall Lamps speak nothing lesse then sepulture; and in their literall draughts prove often obscene and antick peeces: Where we finde D.M. it is obvious to meet with sacrificing patera's, and vessels of libation, upon old sepulchrall Monuments. In the Jewish Hypogæum and subterranean Cell at Rome, was little observable besides the variety of Lamps, and frequent draughts of the holy Candlestick. In authentick draughts of Anthony and Jerome, we meet with thigh-bones and deaths heads; but the cemiteriall Cels of ancient Christians and Martyrs, were filled with draughts of Scripture Stories; not declining the flourishes of Cypresse, Palmes, and Olive; and the mysticall Figures of Peacocks, Doves and Cocks.

But iterately affecting the pourtraits of Enoch, Lazarus, Jonas, and the Vision of Ezechiel, as hopefull draughts, and hinting imagery of the Resurrection; which is the life of the grave, and sweetens our habitations in the Land of Moles and Pismires.

Gentile Incriptions precisely delivered the extent of mens lives, seldome the manner of their deaths, which history it self so often leaves obscure in the records of memorable persons. There is scarce any Philosopher but dies twice or thrice in Laertius; Nor almost any life without two or three deaths in Plutarch; which makes the tragicall ends of noble persons more favourably resented by compassionate Readers, who finde some relief in the Election of such differences.

The certainty of death is attended with uncertainties, in time, manner, places. The variety of Monuments hath often obscured true graves: and Cenotaphs confounded Sepulchres. For beside their reall Tombs, many have found honorary and empty Sepulchres. The variety of Homers Monuments made him of various Countreys. Euripides had his Tomb in Africa, but his sepulture in Macedonia. And Severus found his real Sepulchre in Rome, but his empty grave in Gallia. He that lay in a golden Urne eminently above the Earth, was not likely to finde the quiet of these bones. Many of these Urnes were broke by a vulgar discoverer in hope of inclosed treasure. The ashes of Marcellus were lost above ground, upon the like account. Where profit hath prompted, no age hath wanted such miners. For which the most barbarous Expilators found the most civill Rhetorick. Gold once out of the earth is no more due unto it; What was unreasonably committed to the ground is reasonably resumed from it: Let Monuments and rich Fabricks, not Riches adorn mens ashes. The commerce of the living is not to be transferred unto the dead: It is not injustice to take that which none complains to lose, and no man is wronged where no man is possessor.

What virtue yet sleeps in this terra damnata and aged cinders, were petty magick to experiment; These crumbling reliques and long-fired particles superannate such expectations: Bones, hairs, nails, and teeth of the dead, were the treasures of old Sorcerers. In vain we revive such practices; Present superstition too visibly perpetuates the folly of our Fore-fathers, wherein unto old Observation this Island was so compleat, that it might have instructed Persia.

Plato's historian of the other world, lies twelve dayes incorrupted, while his soul was viewing the large stations of the dead. How to keep the corps seven dayes from corruption by anointing and washing, without exenteration, were an hazardable peece of art, in our choisest practise. How they made distinct separation of bones and ashes from fiery admixture, hath found no historicall solution. Though they seemed to make a distinct collection, and overlooked not Pyrrhus his toe. Some provision they might make by fictile Vessels, Coverings, Tiles, or flat stones, upon and about the body. And in the same Field, not farre from these Urnes, many stones were found under ground, as also by carefull separation of extraneous matter, composing and raking up the burnt bones with forks, observable in that notable lamp of Galvanus. Martianus, who had the sight of the Vas Ustrinum, or vessell wherein they burnt the dead, found in the Esquiline Field at Rome, might have afforded clearer solution. But their insatisfaction herein begat that remarkable invention in the Funerall Pyres of some Princes, by incombustible sheets made with a texture of Asbestos, incremable flax, or Salamanders wool, which preserved their bones and ashes incommixed.

How the bulk of a man should sink into so few pounds of bones and ashes, may seem strange unto any who considers not its constitution, and how slender a masse will remain upon an open and urging fire of the carnall composition. Even bones themselves reduced into ashes, do abate a notable proportion. And consisting much of a volatile salt, when that is fired out, make a light kind of cinders. Although their bulk be disproportionable to their weight, when the heavy principle of Salt is fired out, and the Earth almost only remaineth; Observable in sallow, which makes more Ashes then Oake; and discovers the common fraud of selling Ashes by measure, and not by ponderation.

Some bones make best Skeletons, some bodies quick and speediest ashes: Who would expect a quick flame from Hydropicall Heraclitus? The poysoned Souldier when his Belly brake, put out two pyres in Plutarch. But in the plague of Athens, one private pyre served two or three Intruders; and the Saracens burnt in large heaps, by the King of Castile, shewed how little Fuell sufficeth. Though the Funerall pyre of Patroclus took up an hundred foot, a peece of an old boat burnt Pompey; And if the burthen of Isaac were sufficient for an holocaust, a man may carry his owne pyre.

From animals are drawn good burning lights, and good medicines against burning; Though the sem-inall humour seems of a contrary nature to fire, yet the body compleated proves a combustible lump, wherein fire findes flame even from bones, and some fuell almost from all parts. Though the Metropolis of humidity seems least disposed unto it, which might render the skulls of these Urnes lesse burned then other bones. But all flies or sinks before fire almost in all bodies: When the common ligament is dissolved, the attenuable parts ascend, the rest subside in coal, calx or ashes.

To burn the bones of the King of Edon for Lyme, seems no irrationall ferity; But to drink of the ashes of dead relations, a passionate prodigality. He that hath the ashes of his friend, hath an everlasting treasure: where fire taketh leave, corruption slowly enters; In bones well burnt, fire makes a wall against it self; experimented in copels, and tests of metals, which consist of such ingredients. What the Sun compoundeth, fire analyseth, not transmuteth. That devouring agent leaves almost allwayes a morsell for the Earth, whereof all things are but a colonie; and which, if time permits, the mother Element will have in their primitive masse again.

He that looks for Urnes and old sepulchrall reliques, must not seek them in the ruines of Temples; where no Religion anciently placed them. These were found in a Field, according to ancient custome, in noble or private buriall; the old practise of the Canaanites, the Family of Abraham, and the burying place of Josua, in the borders of his possessions; and also agreeable unto Roman practice to bury by high-ways, whereby their Monuments were under eye: Memorials of themselves, and memento's of mortality into living passengers; whom the Epitaphs of great ones were fain to beg to stay and look upon them. A language though sometimes used, not so proper in Church-Inscriptions. The sensible Rhetorick of the dead, to exemplarity of good life, first admitted the bones of pious men, and Martyrs within Church-wals; which in succeeding ages crept into promiscuous practise. While Constantine was peculiarly favoured to be admitted unto the Church Porch; and the first thus buried in England was in the dayes of Cuthred. Christians dispute how their bodies should lye in the grave. In urnall enterrment they clearly escaped this Controversie: Though we decline the Religious consideration, yet in cemi-teriall and narrower burying places, to avoid confusion and crosse position, a certain posture were to be admitted; Which even Pagan civility observed, The Persians lay North and South, The Megarians and Phoenicians placed their heads to the East: The Athenians, some think, towards the West, which Christians still retain. And Beda will have it to be the posture of our Saviour. That he was crucified with his face towards the West, we will not contend with tradition and probable account; But we applaud not the hand of the Painter, in exalting his Crosse so high above those on either side; since hereof we finde no authentick account in history, and even the crosses found by Helena pretend no such distinction from longitude or dimension.

To be knav'd out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking-bowls, and our bones tuned into Pipes, to delight and sport our Enemies, are Tragically abominations, escaped in burning Burials.

Urnall enterrments, and burnt Reliques lye not in fear of worms, or to be an heritage for Serpents; In carnall sepulture, corruptions seem peculiar unto parts, and some speak of snakes out of the spinall marrow. But while we suppose common wormes in graves, 'tis not easie to finde any there; few in Church-yards above a foot deep, fewer or none in Churches, though in fresh decayed bodies. Teeth, bones, and hair, give the most lasting defiance to corruption. In an Hydropicall body ten years buried in a Church-yard, we met with a fat concretion, where the nitre of the Earth, and the salt and lixivious liquor of the body, had coagulated large lumps of fat, into the consistence of the hardest castle-soap; whereof part remaineth with us. After a battle with the Persians the Roman Corps decayed in few dayes, while the Persian bodies remained dry and uncorrupted. Bodies in the same ground do not uniformly dissolve, nor bones equally moulder; whereof in the opprobrious disease we expect no long duration. The body of the Marquesse of Dorset seemed sound and handsomely cereclothed, that after seventy eight years was found uncorrupted. Common Tombs preserve not beyond powder: A firmer consistence and compage of parts might be expected from Arefaction, deep buriall or charcoal. The greatest Antiquities of mortall bodies may remain in putrified bones, whereof, though we take not in the pillar of Lots wife, or Metamorphosis of Ortelius, some may be older then Pyramids, in the putrified Reliques of the generall inundation. When Alexander opened the Tomb of Cyrus, the remaining bones discovered his proportion, whereof urnall fragments afford but a bad conjecture, and have this disadvantage of grave enterrments, that they leave us ignorant of most personall discoveries. For since bones afford not only rectitude and stability, but figure unto the body; It is no impossible Physiognomy to conjecture at fleshy appendencies; and after what shape the muscles and carnous parts might hang in their full consistences. A full spread Cariola shews a well-shaped horse behinde, handsome formed skulls, give some analogie of fleshy resemblance. A criticall view of bones makes a good distinction of sexes. Even colour is not beyond conjecture; since it is hard to be deceived in the distinction of Negro's skulls. Dantes Characters are to be found in skulls as well as faces. Hercules is not onely known by his foot. Other parts make out their proportions, and inferences upon whole or parts. And since the dimensions of the head measure the whole body, and the figure thereof gives conjecture of the principall faculties; Physiognomy outlives our selves, and ends not in our graves.

Severe contemplators observing these lasting reliques, may think them good monuments of persons past, little advantage to future beings. And considering that power which subdueth all things unto it self, that can resume the scattered Atomes, or identifie out of any thing, conceive it superfluous to expect a resurrection out of Reliques. But the soul subsisting, other matter clothed with due accidents, may salve the individuality: Yet the Saints we observe arose from graves and monuments, about the holy City. Some think the ancient Patriarchs so earnestly desired to lay their bones in Canaan, as hoping to make a part of that Resurrection, and though thirty miles from Mount Calvary, at least to lie in that Region, which should produce the first-fruits of the dead. And if according to learned conjecture, the bodies of men shall rise where their greatest Reliques remain, many are not like to erre in the Topography of their Resurrection, though their bones or bodies be after translated by Angels into the field of Ezechiels vision, or as some will order it, into the Valley of Judgement, or Jehosaphat.

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<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/hydriotaphia-chapter-3>

Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter IV

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

STROMATA 216

INTRODUCTION

In this fourth movement of Urn Burial, Browne turns antiquarian - cataloguing how Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Christians alike handled their dead, each rite freighted with some inarticulate hope of a hereafter. Pagan superstition and Christian ceremony are set side by side without condescension; Browne finds in both the same stubborn refusal to believe the grave is final. The prose moves associatively, one curious custom summoning the next - burning, anointing, the placing of coins for Charon's fee - until the chapter turns, in its closing paragraphs, toward the graver question beneath the ethnography: what it would mean to face death without any expectation of what comes after.

Christians have handsomely glossed the deformity of death, by careful consideration of the body, and civil rites which take of brutall terminations. And though they conceived all reparable by a resurrection, cast not all care of enterrment. And since the ashes of Sacrifices burnt upon the Altar of God, were carefully carried out by the Priests, and deposed in a clean field; since they acknowledged their bodies to be the lodging of Christ, and temples of the holy Ghost, they devolved not all upon the sufficiency of soul existence; and therefore with long services and full solemnities concluded their last Exequies, wherein to all distinctions the Greek devotion seems most pathetically ceremonious.

Christian invention hath chiefly driven at Rites, which speak hopes of another life, and hints of a Resurrection. And if the ancient Gentiles held not the immortality of their better part, and some subsistence after death; in severall rites, customes, actions and expressions, they contradicted their own opinions: wherein Democritus went high, even to the thought of a resurrection, as scoffingly recorded by Pliny. What can be more expresse than the expression of Phyocyllides? Or who would expect from Lucretius a sentence of Ecclesiastes? Before Plato could speak, the soul had wings in Homer, which fell not, but flew out of the body into the mansions of the dead; who also observed that handsome distinction of Demas and Soma, for the body conjoynd to the soul and the body separated from it. Lucian spoke much truth in jest, when he said, that part of Hercules which proceeded from Alchmena perished, that from Jupiter remained immortall. Thus Socrates was content that his friends should bury his body, so they would not think they buried Socrates, and regarding only his immortall part, was indifferent to be burnt or buried. From such Considerations Diogenes might contemn Sepulture. And being satisfied that the soul could not perish, grow carelesse of corporall enterrment. The Stoicks who thought the souls of wise men had their habitation about the moon, might make slight account of subterraneous deposition; whereas the Pythagorians and transcorporating Philosophers, who were to be often buried, held great

care of their enterrment. And the Platonicks rejected not a due care of the grave, though they put their ashes to unreasonable expectations, in their tedious term of return and long set revolution.

Men have lost their reason in nothing so much as their religion, wherein stones and clouts make Martyrs; and since the religion of one seems madnesse unto another, to afford an account or rationall of old Rites, requires no rigid Reader; That they kindled the pyre aversly, or turning their face from it, was an handsome Symbole of unwilling ministration; That they washed their bones with wine and milk, that the mother wrapt them in Linnen, and dryed them in her bosome, the first fostering part, and place of their nourishment; That they opened their eyes towards heaven, before they kindled the fire, as the place of their hopes or originall, were no improper Ceremonies. Their last valediction thrice uttered by the attendants was also very solemn, and somewhat answered by Christians, who thought it too little, if they threw not the earth thrice upon the enterred body. That in strewing their Tombs the Romans affected the Rose, the Greeks Amaranthus and myrtle; that the Funerall pyre consisted of sweet fuell, Cypresse, Firre, Larix, Yewe, and Trees perpetually verdant, lay silent expressions of their surviving hopes: Wherein Christians which deck their Coffins with Bays have found a more elegant Embleme. For that tree seeming dead, will restore it self from the root, and its dry and exuccous leaves resume their verdure again; which if we mistake not, we have also observed in fures. Whether the planting of yewe in Churchyards, hold not its originall from ancient Funerall rites, or as an Embleme of Resurrection from its perpetual verdure, may also admit conjecture.

They made use of Musick to excite or quiet the affections of their friends, according to different harmonies. But the secret and symbolically hint was the harmonical nature of the soul; which delivered from the body, went again to enjoy the primitive harmony of heaven, from whence it first descended; which according to its progresse traced by antiquity, came down by Cancer, and ascended by Capricornus.

They burnt not children before their teeth appeared, as apprehending their bodies too tender a morsell for fire, and that their gristly bones would scarce leave separable reliques after the pyral combustion. That they kindled not fire in their houses for some days after, was a strict memoriall of the late afflicting fire. And mourning without hope, they had an happy fraud against excessive lamentation, by a common opinion that deep sorrows disturbed their ghosts.

That they buried their dead on their backs, or in a supine position, seems agreeable unto profound sleep, and common posture of dying; contrary to the most naturall way of birth; Nor unlike our pendulous posture, in the doubtfull state of the womb. Diogenes was singular, who preferred a prone situation in the grave, and some Christians like neither, who decline the figure of rest, and make choice of an erect posture.

That they carried them out of the world with their feet forward, not inconsonant unto reason: As contrary unto the native posture of man, and his production first into it. And also agreeable unto their opinions, while they bid adieu unto the world, not to look again upon it; whereas Mahometans who think to return to a delightfull life again, are carried forth with their heads forward, and looking toward their houses.

They closed their eyes as parts which first die or first discover the sad effects of death. But their iterated clamations to excitate their dying or dead friends, or revoke them unto life again, was a vanity of

affection; as not presumably ignorant of the criticall tests of death, by apposition of feathers, glasses, and reflexion of figures, which dead eyes represent not; which however not strictly verifiable in fresh and warm cadavers, could hardly elude the test, in corps of four or five dayes.

That they suck'd in the last breath of their expiring friends, was surely a practice of no medicall institution, but a loose opinion that the soul passed out that way, and a fondnesse of affection from some Pythagoricall foundation, that the spirit of one body passed into another; which they wished might be their own.

That they powred oyle upon the pyre, was a tolerable practise, while the intention rested in facilitating the accension; But to place good Omens in the quick and speedy burning, to sacrifice unto the windes for a dispatch in this office, was a low form of superstition.

The Archimime, or Jester attending the Funerall train, and imitating the speeches, gesture, and manners of the deceased, was too light for such solemnities, contradicting their Funerall Orations, and dolefull rites of the grave.

That they buried a peece of money with them as a Fee of the Elysian Ferriman, was a practise full of folly. But the ancient custome of placing coynes in considerable Urnes, and the present practise of burying medals in the Noble Foundations of Europe, are laudable wayes of historicall discoveries, in actions, persons, Chronologies; and posterity will applaud them.

We examine not the old Laws of Sepulture, exempting certain persons from buriall or burning. But hereby we apprehend that these were not the bones of persons Planet-struck or burnt with fire from Heaven: No Reliques of Traitors to their Countrey, Self-killers, or Sacrilegious Malefactors; Persons in old apprehension unworthy of the earth; condemned unto the Tartara's of Hell, and bottomlesse pit of Plato, from whence there was no redemption.

Nor were only many customes questionable in order to their Obsequies, but also sundry practises, fictions, and conceptions, discordant or obscure, of their state and future beings; whether unto eight or ten bodies of men to adde one of a woman, as being more inflammable, and unctuously constituted for the better pyrell combustion, were any rationall practise: Or whether the complaint of Perianders Wife be tolerable, that wanting her Funerall burning she suffered intolerable cold in Hell, according to the constitution of the infernall house of Pluto, wherein cold makes a great part of their tortures; it cannot passe without some question.

Why the Female Ghosts appear unto Ulysses, before the Heroes and masculine spirits? Why the Psyche or soul of Tiresias is of the masculine gender; who being blinde on earth sees more then all the rest in hell; Why the Funerall Suppers consisted of Eggs, Beans, Smallage, and Lettuce, since the dead are made to eat Asphodels about the Elyzian medows? Why since there is no Sacrifice acceptable, nor any propitiation for the Covenant of the grave; men set up the Deity of Morta, and fruitlessly adored Divinities without ears? it cannot escape some doubt.

The dead seem all alive in the humane Hades of Homer, yet cannot well speak, prophesie, or know the living, except they drink bloud, wherein is the life of man. And therefore the souls of Penelope's

Paramours conducted by Mercury chirped like bats, and those which followed Hercules made a noise but like a flock of birds.

The departed spirits know things past and to come, yet are ignorant of things present. Agamemnon foretels what should happen unto Ulysses, yet ignorantly enquires what is become of his own Son. The Ghosts are afraid of swords in Homer, yet Sybilla tels Æneas in Virgil, the thin habit of spirits was beyond the force of weapons. The spirits put off their malice with their bodies, and Cæsar and Pompey accord in Latine Hell, yet Ajax in Homer endures not a conference with Ulysses: And Deiphobus appears all mangled in Virgils Ghosts, yet we meet with perfect shadows among the wounded ghosts of Homer.

Since Charon in Lucian applauds his condition among the dead, whether it be handsomely said of Achilles, that living contemner of death, that he had rather be a Plowmans servant then Emperour of the dead? How Hercules his soul is in hell, and yet in heaven, and Julius his soul in a Starre, yet seen by Æneas in hell, except the Ghosts were but Images and shadows of the soul, received in higher mansions, according to the ancient division of body, soul, and image or simulachrum of them both. The particulars of future beings must needs be dark unto ancient Theories, which Christian Philosophy yet determines but in a Cloud of opinions. A Dialogue between two Infants in the womb concerning the state of this world, might handsomely illustrate our ignorance of the next, whereof methinks we yet discourse in Platoes denne, and are but Embryon Philosophers. Pythagoras escapes in the fabulous hell of Dante, among that swarm of Philosophers, wherein whilest we meet with Plato and Socrates, Cato is to be found in no lower place then Purgatory. Among all the set, Epicurus is most considerable, whom men make honest without an Elyzium, who contemned life without encouragement of immortality, and making nothing after death, yet made nothing of the King of terrours.

Were the happinesse of the next world as closely apprehended as the felicities of this, it were a martyrdome to live; and unto such as consider none hereafter, it must be more then death to dye, which makes us amazed at those audacities, that durst be nothing, and return into their Chaos again. Certainly such spirits as could contemn death, when they expected no better being after, would have scorned to live had they known any. And therefore we applaud not the judgment of Machiavel, that Christianity makes men cowards, or that with the confidence of but half dying, the despised virtues of patience and humility, have abased the spirits of men, which Pagan principles exalted, but rather regulated the wildenesse of audacities, in the attempts, grounds, and eternall sequels of death; wherein men of the boldest spirits are often prodigiously temerarious. Nor can we extenuate the valour of ancient Martyrs, who contemned death in the uncomfortable scene of their lives, and in their decrepit Martyrdomes did probably lose not many moneths of their dayes, or parted with life when it was scarce worth the living. For beside that long time past holds no consideration unto a slender time to come they had no small disadvantage from the constitution of old age, which naturally makes men fearfull; And complexionally superannuated from the bold and couragious thoughts of youth and fervent years. But the contempt of death from corporall animosity, promoteth not our felicity. They may sit in the Orchestra, and noblest Seats of Heaven, who have held up shaking hands in the fire, and humanely contended for glory.

Mean while Epicurus lyes deep in Dante's hell, wherein we meet with Tombs enclosing souls which denied their immortalities. But whether the virtuous heathen, who lived better then he spake, or erring in the principles of himself, yet lived above Philosophers of more specious Maximes, lye so deep as he is placed; at least so low as not to rise against Christians, who beleiving or knowing that truth, have lastingly denied it in their practise and conversation, were a quæry too sad to insist on.

But all or most apprehensions rested in Opinions of some future being, which ignorantly or coldly beleaved, begat those perverted conceptions, Ceremonies, Sayings, which Christians pity or laugh at. Happy are they, which live not in that disadvantage of time, when men could say little for futurity, but from reason. Whereby the noblest mindes fell often upon doubtfull deaths, and melancholy Dissolutions; With these hopes Socrates warmed his doubtfull spirits, against that cold potion, and Cato before he durst give the fatall stroak spent part of the night in reading the immortality of Plato, thereby confirming his wavering hand unto the animosity of that attempt.

It is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, to tell him he is at the end of his nature; or that there is no further state to come, unto which this seems progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine; Without this accomplishment the naturall expectation and desire of such a state, were but a fallacy in nature, unsatisfied Considerators would quarrell the justice of their constitutions, and rest content that Adam had fallen lower, whereby by knowing no other Originall, and deeper ignorance of themselves, they might have enjoyed the happiness of inferiour Creatures; who in tranquility possesse their Constitutions, as having not the apprehension to deplore their own natures. And being framed below the circumference of these hopes, or cognition of better being, the wisdom of God hath necessitated their Contentment: But the superiour ingredient and obscured part of our selves, whereto all present felicities afford no resting contentment, will be able at last to tell us we are more then our present selves; and evacuate such hopes in the fruition of their own accomplishments.

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658), Chapter IV.

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<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/hydriotaphia-chapter-4>

Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter V

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

STROMATA 217

INTRODUCTION

Sir Thomas Browne closes his 1658 meditation on the burial urns of Norfolk with the passage that made the book immortal. Having spent four chapters cataloguing ancient funerary customs with an antiquarian's patience, he turns here to confront what all that cataloguing was really circling: the impossibility of being remembered, and the smaller impossibility of caring. His prose loosens into its most famous cadences as monuments, epitaphs, and even the stars themselves are weighed and found wanting against "the sufficiency of Christian Immortality." Baroque, incantatory, and startlingly honest about oblivion, this chapter rewards slow reading aloud as much as silent study.

Now since these dead bones have already out-lastred the living ones of Methuselah, and in a yard underground, and thin walls of clay, out-worn all the strong and specious buildings above it; and quietly rested under the drums and tramlings of three conquests; What Prince can promise such diuturnity unto his Reliques, or might not gladly say:

| Sic ego componi versus in ossa velim. \ In this way I wish to be buried \ Tibullus. Elegies 3.2.25

Time which antiquates Antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these minor Monuments. In vain we hope to be known by open and visible conservatories, when to be unknown was the means of their continuation and obscurity their protection: If they dyed by violent hands, and were thrust into their Urnes, these bones become considerable, and some old Philosophers would honour them, whose souls they conceived most pure, which were thus snatched from their bodies; and to retain a stranger propension unto them: whereas they weariedly left a languishing corps, and with faint desires of re-union. If they fell by long and aged decay, yet wrapt up in the bundle of time, they fall into indistinction, and make but one blot with Infants. If we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death; our life is a sad composition; We live with death, and die not in a moment. How many pulses made up the life of Methuselah, were work for Archimedes: Common Counters summe up the life of Moses his man. Our dayes become considerable like petty sums by minute accumulations; where numerous fractions make up but small round numbers; and our dayes of a span long make not one little finger.

If the nearnesse of our last necessity, brought a nearer conformity unto it, there were a happinesse in hoary hairs, and no calamity in half senses. But the long habit of living indisposeth us for dying; When Avarice makes us the sport of death; When even David grew politickly cruell; and Solomon could hardly be said to be the wisest of men. But many are too early old, and before the date of age.

Adversity stretcheth our dayes, misery makes Alcmenas nights, and time hath no wings unto it. But the most tedious being is that which can unwish it self, content to be nothing, or never to have been, which was beyond the male-content of Job, who cursed not the day of his life, but his Nativity: Content to have so farre been, as to have a Title to future being; Although he had lived here but in an hidden state of life, and as it were an abortion.

What Song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling Questions are not beyond all conjecture. What time the persons of these Ossuaries entred the famous Nations of the dead, and slept with Princes and Counsellours, might admit a wide resolution. But who were the proprietaries of these bones, or what bodies these ashes made up, were a question above Antiquarism. Not to be resolved by man, nor easily perhaps by spirits, except we consult the Provinciaall Guardians, or tutelary Observators. Had they made as good provision for their names, as they have done for their Reliques, they had not so grosly erred in the art of perpetuation. But to subsist in bones, and be but Pyramidally extant, is a fallacy in duration. Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto themselves, a fruitlesse continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as Emblemes of mortall vanities; Antidotes against pride, vain-glory, and madding vices. Pagan vain-glories which thought the world might last for ever, had encouragement for ambition, and finding no Atropos unto the immortality of their Names, were never damp't with the necessity of oblivion. Even old ambitions had the advantage of ours, in the attempts of their vain-glories, who acting early, and before the probable Meridian of time, have by this time found great accomplishment of their designes, whereby the ancient Heroes have already out-lasting their Monuments, and Mechanicall preservations. But in this latter Scene of time we cannot expect such Mummies unto our memories, when ambition may fear the Prophecy of Elias, and Charles the fifth can never hope to live within two Methusela's of Hector.

And therefore restlesse inquietude for the diuturnity of our memories unto present considerations, seems a vanity almost out of date, and superanuated peece of folly. We cannot hope to live so long in our names, as some have done in their persons, one face of Janus holds no proportion unto the other. 'Tis too late to be ambitious. The great mutations of the world are acted, or time may be too short for our designes. To extend our memories by Monuments, whose death we dayly pray for, and whose duration we cannot hope, without injury to our expectations, in the advent of the last day, were a contradiction to our beliefs. We whose generations are ordained in this setting part of time, are providentially taken off from such imaginations. And being necessitated to eye the remaining particle of futurity, are naturally constituted unto thoughts of the next world, and cannot excusably decline the consideration of that duration, which maketh Pyramids pillars of snow, and all that's past a moment.

Circles and right lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortall right-lined circle, must conclude and shut up all. There is no antidote against the Opium of time, which temporally considereth all things; Our Fathers finde their graves in our short memories, and sadly tell us how we may be buried in our Survivors. Grave-stones tell truth scarce forty years: Generations passe while some trees stand, and old Families last not three Oaks. To be read by bare Inscriptions like many in Gruter, to hope for Eternity by Ænigmaticall Epithetes, or first letters of our names, to be studied by Antiquaries, who we were,

and have new Names given us like many of the Mummies, are cold consolations unto the Students of perpetuity, even by everlasting Languages.

To be content that times to come should only know there was such a man, not caring whether they knew more of him, was a frigid ambition in Cardan: disparaging his horoscopol inclination and judgement of himself, who cares to subsist like Hippocrates Patients, or Achilles horses in Homer, under naked nominations, without deserts and noble acts, which are the balsame of our memories, the Entelechia and soul of our subsistences. To be namelesse in worthy deeds exceeds an infamous history. The Canaanitish woman lives more happily without a name, then Herodias with one. And who had not rather have been the good theef, then Pilate?

But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the Pyramids? Herostratus lives that burnt the Temple of Diana, he is almost lost that built it; Time hath spared the Epitaph of Adrians horse, confounded that of himself. In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equall durations; and Thersites is like to live as long as Agamenon, without the favour of the everlasting Register: Who knows whether the best of men be known? or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, then any that stand remembred in the known account of time? the first man had been as unknown as the last, and Methuselahs long life had been his only Chronicle.

Oblivion is not to be hired: The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been, to be found in the Register of God, not in the record of man. Twenty seven Names make up the first story, and the recorded names ever since contain not one living Century. The number of the dead long exceedeth all that shall live. The night of time far surpasseth the day, and who knows when was the Æquinox? Every houre addes unto that current Arithmetique, which scarce stands one moment. And since death must be the Lucina of life, and even Pagans could doubt whether thus to live, were to dye. Since our longest Sunne sets at right descensions, and makes but winter arches, and therefore it cannot be long before we lie down in darknesse, and have our lights in ashes. Since the brother of death daily haunts us with dying memento's, and time that grows old it self, bids us hope no long duration: Diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation. Darknesse and light divide the course of time, and oblivion shares with memory, a great part even of our living beings; we slightly remember our felicities, and the smartest stroaks of affliction leave but short smart upon us. Sense endureth no extremities, and sorrows destroy us or themselves. To weep into stones are fables. Afflictions induce callosities, miseries are slippery, or fall like snow upon us, which notwithstanding is no unhappy stupidity. To be ignorant of evils to come, and forgetfull of evils past, is a mercifull provision in nature, whereby we digest the mixture of our few and evil dayes, and our delivered senses not relapsing into cutting remembrances, our sorrows are not kept raw by the edge of repetitions. A great part of Antiquity contented their hopes of subsistency with a transmigration of their souls. A good way to continue their memories, while having the advantage of plurall successions, they could not but act something remarkable in such variety of beings, and enjoying the fame of their passed selves, make accumulation of glory unto their last durations. Others rather then be lost in the uncomfortable night of nothing, were content to recede into the common being, and make one particle of the publick soul of all things, which was no more then to return unto their unknown and divine Originall again. Ægyptian ingenuity was more unsatisfied, contriving their bodies

in sweet consistences, to attend the return of their souls. But all was vanity, feeding the winde, and folly. The Ægyptian Mummies, which Cambyzes or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummie is become Merchandise, Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsoms.

In vain do individuals hope for Immortality, or any patent from oblivion, in preservations below the Moon: Men have been deceived even in their flatteries above the Sun, and studied conceits to perpetuate their names in heaven. The various Cosmography of that part hath already varied the names of contrived constellations; Nimrod is lost in Orion, and Osyris in the Dogge-starre. While we look for incorruption in the heavens, we finde they are but like the Earth; Durable in their main bodies, alterable in their parts: whereof beside Comets and new Stars, perspectives begin to tell tales. And the spots that wander about the Sun, with Phaetons favour, would make clear conviction.

There is nothing strictly immortall, but immortality; whatever hath no beginning may be confident of no end. All others have a dependent being, and within the reach of destruction, which is the peculiar of that necessary essence that cannot destroy it self; And the highest strain of omnipotency to be so powerfully constituted, as not to suffer even from the power of it self. But the sufficiency of Christian Immortality frustrates all earthly glory, and the quality of either state after death, makes a folly of posthumous memory. God who can only destroy our souls, and hath assured our resurrection, either of our bodies or names hath directly promised no duration. Wherein there is so much chance that the boldest Expectants have found unhappy frustration; and to hold long subsistence, seems but a scape in oblivion. But man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnizing Nativities and Deaths with equall lustre, nor omitting Ceremonies of bravery, in the infamy of his nature.

Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us. A small fire sufficeth for life, great flames seemed too little after death, while men vainly affected precious pyres, and to burn like Sardanapalus, but the wisdom of funerall Laws found the folly of prodigall blazes, and reduced undoing fires, unto the rule of sober obsequies, wherein few could be so mean as not to provide wood, pitch, a mourner, and an Urne.

Five Languages secured not the Epitaph of Gordianus; The man of God lives longer without a Tomb then any by one, invisibly interred by Angels, and adjudged to obscurity, though not without some marks directing humane discovery. Enoch and Elias without either tomb or buriall, in an anomalous state of being, are the great Examples of perpetuity, in their long and living memory, in strict account being still on this side death, and having a late part yet to act upon this stage of earth. If in the decretory term of the world we shall not all dye but be changed, according to received translation; the last day will make but few graves; at least quick Resurrections will anticipate lasting Sepultures; Some Graves will be opened before they are quite closed, and Lazarus will be no wonder. When many that feared to dye shall groane that they can dye but once, the dismall state is the second and living death, when life puts despair on the damned; when men shall wish the coverings of Mountaines, not of Monuments, and annihilation shall be courted.

While some have studied Monuments, others have studiously declined them: and some have been so vainly boisterous, that they durst not acknowledge their Graves; wherein Alaricus seems most subtle, who had a River turned to hide his bones at the bottome. Even Sylla that thought himself safe in his Urne, could not prevent revenging tongues, and stones thrown at his Monument. Happy are they whom privacy makes innocent, who deal so with men in this world, that they are not afraid to meet them in the next, who when they dye, make no commotion among the dead, and are not toucht with that poetick taunt of Isaiah.

Pyramids, Arches, Obelisks, were but the irregularities of vain-glory, and wilde enormities of ancient magnanimity. But the most magnanimous resolution rests in the Christian Religion, which trampleth upon pride, and sets on the neck of ambition, humbly pursuing that infallible perpetuity, unto which all others must diminish their diameters, and be poorly seen in Angles of contingency.

Pious spirits who passed their dayes in raptures of futurity, made little more of this world, then the world that was before it, while they lay obscure in the Chaos of pre-ordination, and night of their fore-be-

ings. And if any have been so happy as truly to understand Christian annihilation, extasis, exolution, liquefaction, transformation, the kisse of the Spouse, gustation of God, and ingression into the divine shadow, they have already had an handsome anticipation of heaven; the glory of the world is surely over, and the earth in ashes unto them.

To subsist in lasting Monuments, to live in their productions, to exist in their names, and prædicament of Chymera's, was large satisfaction unto old expectations, and made one part of their Elyziums. But all this is nothing in the Metaphysicks of true belief. To live indeed is to be again our selves, which being not only an hope but an evidence in noble beleevers; 'Tis all one to lye in St Innocents Church-yard, as in the Sands of Ægypt: Ready to be any thing, in the extasie of being ever, and as content with six foot as the Moles of Adrianus.

Tabesne cadavera solvat An rogos haud refert \ It makes no difference whether corruption, or the funeral pyre, dissolve the carcass \ Lucan. Civil War. 7.809-810

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658), Chapter V.

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