

# Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter I

*Sir Thomas Browne*

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Essay

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## 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.

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## 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 interment, 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 enterment with Pagans, that some have suffered Ecclesiastical censures, for making no scruple thereof.

The Musselman beleevers 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 beleewe 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.

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

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Translation: Author died 1682. Original English composition, no translation involved. Verified consistent 17th-century register throughout, no modern paraphrasing detected.

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