

Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter III

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

STROMATA 215

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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

Porphyrice 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 Chalice; 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; Whilst 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, huddled 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.

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

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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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