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## Death and Burial in Post-medieval Europe

The archaeological study of death and burial tells us about people in the post-medieval past. How much did practices vary across Europe? Do mortuary practices in this period reflect religious beliefs, social aspirations, thoughts about life and death, emotional responses to love and loss, or a combination of these factors? How do we know? Given the nature of raw archaeological evidence, these questions are often archaeologically hard to answer.

The archaeology of death and burial in Europe in the post-medieval period is still a relatively underdeveloped research area. In part this mirrors the low level of archaeological research on post-medieval archaeology generally in many European countries, and in part the narrowness of a disciplinary field. Additionally, post-medieval mortuary archaeology is overwhelmingly determined by the needs of developers rather than researchers, and is geographically concentrated in those areas (generally larger cities) where the cemeteries, sanctuaries and other burial grounds of the last 500 years have been threatened or destroyed because of new development programmes. Because of the commercial requirements of conducting commercial archaeology, which are different from those often enjoyed by university-based researchers, the results and conclusions of much of the work that is carried out are not always published in peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, there is very little literature that offers synthesis or critical observation on the archaeology of post-medieval death and burial across a single country and none that attempts to draw general conclusions across Europe. Overwhelmingly, archaeological writings on the subject are related to specific sites, and overwhelmingly these works are more descriptive than interpretive. Unfortunately they are not well known by other archaeologists, even within their own countries. There are of course exceptions: some sites are superbly illustrated and written up, like the Spitalfields site in London (Mollison & Cox, 1973; Reeve & Adams, 1992), which is well published and widely known internationally. But these sites are very

few, and there is now a real appetite on the part of those researching the burial practices of the last 500 years or so for an opportunity to present and discuss their work. In this volume, therefore, we hope, an early contribution to an international forum of what is still a new and fledgling area of archaeological research. There are two reasons: first, attention to burial practices of the last 500 years is being drawn to the general recognition that the archaeological study of recent centuries can be an interesting and valuable part of our disciplinary endeavours. Journals such as *Archaeologia Postmedievalis* in Italy, the *Czech Studies in Archaeology and Anthropology*, and the publications of the *Deutscher Geschichtswissenschaftlicher Tagung des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* in Germany and the Irish Post-medieval Archaeology Group signal both the volume of post-medieval archaeology