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Dead Virginians: The Corpse and its Uses in Early Virginia

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

David William Roettger, B.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Advisor: Dr. Sarah Meacham, Director of Graduate Studies and Associate
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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

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By David W. Roettger, B.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Dr. Sarah H. Meacham, Director of Graduate Studies and Associate Professor,
History Department

The thesis traces the history of colonial Virginia in an attempt to uncover the origins of several peculiarities in Virginia death-ways. Elite Virginians buried at home more often than not (where they could protect the dead from animal desecration), while avoided death's heads, reapers, and bone based tomb and mourning jewelry iconography even though such was popular throughout the British Atlantic. Research done for this thesis reveals a fear on the part of elite Virginians regarding questions of both corpse desecration and natural putrefaction. The cause of this cultural obsession lie in two facts: The blackening of the early colony's reputation by warfare with Native Americans and the cannibalism associated with the Starving Times, and later the casual violence inherent in the slave system. Virginia's elite disregarded images of decay and death and embraced symbols of stability both to legitimize Virginia as a place for Europeans to settle, and to disguise the barbarity of their economic system.

Introduction

Situated at the center of the extensive gardens at his Westover plantation, the grave marker of William Byrd II at Westover bears a striking resemblance to the plantation's main house. A central square shaft terminates at head height in a pyramid reminiscent of a peaked roof. Two shorter stone boxes jut out from the sides, mimicking the house's two wings. By copying Byrd II's home so blatantly, his tombstone links Byrd II's memory with his worldly achievements. By burying where and how he did, Byrd II "made the entire Westover complex his monument, expressing identity and seeking immortality through the land of Virginia."¹ The inscription on the stone follows this trend, touting Byrd II's accomplishments while failing to mention salvation, death, or resurrection:

Here lyeth the Honourable William Byrd Esq being born to one of the amplest fortunes in this country he was sent early to England for his education where under the care and instruction of Sir Robert Southwell and ever favored with his particular instructions he made a happy proficiency in polite and various learning; by the means of the same noble friend he was introduced to the acquaintance of many of the first persons of that age for knowledge, wit, virtue, birth, or high station, and particularly attracted a most close and bosom friend-ship with the learned and illustrious Charles Boyle Earl of Orrey. He was called to the bar in the Middle Temple, studied for some time in the low countries, visited the court of France and was chosen Fellow of the Royal Society. Thus eminently fitted for the service and ornament of his Country, he was made Receiver general of his Majesty's revenues here, was thrice appointed publick agent to the Court and ministry of England, and being thirty-seven years a member at last became President of the council of this Colony to all this were added a great elegancy of taste and life, the well-bred gentleman and polite companion the splendid Oeconomist and prudent

¹ Patrick Henry Butler III, "Knowing the Uncertainties of this Life: Death Society in Colonial Tidewater Virginia" (Ph. D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 76.

father of a family with the constant enemy of all ex-horbitant power and hearty friend to the liberties of his Country, Nat: Mar. 28 1674 Mort. Aug. 26 1744 An. AEtat 70.²

The traditional *momento mori* imagery of skulls, skeletons, urns, or hour-glasses that made early modern New England and British tomb iconography so justifiably famous is missing. Byrd's tomb was an oddity, a marker which sought to advertise the stability and continuity of Virginian planter society (and its acceptability within the elite social world of Europe) by flaunting earthly achievement, at a time in which many in the rest of the British world still covered their burial monuments in symbols of decay and death. It is solid and comforting in a world where gravestones were often billboards for deterioration and the ever-present certainty of the demise of the physical self.

As unusual as Byrd II's memorial was in the wider British world, in Virginia's small corner of the Atlantic, the memorial was not, in fact, unusual. Like the tombs of colonial Virginia's elite at Williamsburg's Burton Parish graveyard, Richmond's St. John's Church graveyard, and the still existent home burials of several major plantations surveyed for this essay, Byrd's burial and gravestone highlighted several of the oddities in Virginian death-ways: A tomb built like a house, burial at home instead of the church, and open pride in worldly accomplishments. While such tombs could be found in other parts of British world, and death heads did occasionally turn up on Virginian head stones, in no other part of the British world were *momento mori* more rejected, nor opposing images of stable continuity so embraced. The unusual Virginia death-ways which existed during the period between 1600 and 1750 arose from the interaction between Native Americans, English and African settlers, and the New World of

² A transcription of the epitaph is available at <http://westover-plantation.com/about.htm>. Retrieved on Nov. 25, 2013. Minor discrepancies between the author's own notes and the transcription provided by Historic Westover Plantation have been corrected in the transcriptions favor as the epitaph, though remarkably well preserved when compared to other eighteenth-century Virginian examples, is still somewhat faded and hard to read.

Virginia. The story that emerged was of an inherently insecure forced labor system based on perpetual brutality, an upper class insecure in their place both in the Atlantic World and atop their own system, and an original sin which had stained the colony's reputation forever. Nowhere else in the British Atlantic did the gentry feel such a strong need to prove their worth, and the future security of that worth, than in Virginia. William Byrd II's tomb was designed then not in England, where it was constructed and the epitaph carved, but in Virginia, by a long string of events reaching back to colony's first settlers.

Death, in the words of one historian, is one of the few human experiences which is both "universal and universally meaningful."³ How a civilization handles this most common and yet most severe of crises says more about the assumptions and core beliefs of that society than any other cultural response. There is no area where this is more vividly expressed than in the relationship a society fashions between living bodies and dead ones. Elite Virginians' relationship with the dead, their own and others, was marked by both the fear of disintegration and a deep knowledge of the use to which that same fear in others could be put.

This thesis argues that the peculiarities evident in the conception of death and the corpse among the elite in colonial Virginia fashioned during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can best be attributed to a cultural obsession with maintaining the physical and conceptual integrity of the elite deceased. It was a culture in which only an intact corpse was an acceptable corpse, and which approached decomposition and mutilation with a particularly strong mix of fascination, revulsion and a callous acceptance of its usefulness in instilling obedience in others. While many of the factors that contributed to the elite Virginian conception of death were

³ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 6.

common in both the Atlantic World generally and colonial America specifically, the way they interacted with both each other and the physical realities of life in the unsettled world of early Virginia, produced an approach to death, and particularly the corpse, unique unto itself. Virginia's rural planters buried at home more often, and earlier, than any other elite group in the British Atlantic. In some instances they chose to do so even when resting among their friends, family and neighbors in some other location was an option. Elite and non-elite Virginians alike used coffins whenever circumstances permitted, a phenomena that would not become ubiquitous in England for decades.⁴ When the elite buried their dead, moreover, they built monuments that avoided the death's heads, reapers, skeletons, and urns of the *memento mori* style popular in England and the other colonies and instead chose architectural features which tied the deceased to the plantation house and implied the continuance and stability of their society.⁵ A simmering tension appeared in the public discourse as well, with Virginians torn between fascination, abhorrence, and practical acceptance in regards to issues such as corpse mutilation and cannibalism. In a myriad of ways then, Virginia's elites used their remains as a way to make the argument for Virginia's legitimacy as a home for white men, while attempting to avoid the use of images that might call that legitimacy into question.

The colonists who founded the first permanent English settlement in the Americas at Jamestown in 1607 came from a society which only seventy years before had begun a radical reevaluation of its death-ways. The Reformation upset the tentative reconciliation of body and spirit which the Catholic Church had built over 1,500 years of intense discussion. Many of the

⁴ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 157.

⁵ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 271 – 278; and Lauren F. Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith: Anglican Religious Practice in the Elite Households of Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 150-151.

major changes which the reformers advocated consisted of the rejection of long-held beliefs about the corpse and resurrection, such as Purgatory, Saints' relics, requiem masses, burial in consecrated ground, and transubstantiation. The Reformation challenged many things. Among the most radical were these challenges to traditional death-ways, Christians' concept of the dead and their place, and the relationship between living and dead bodies.

When Martin Luther said that it did not matter if his body was buried in a forest he was not simply making a characteristically transgressive attack on church ceremonialism, but rather severing the link between the living and the dead which Catholicism had, after more than a millennia of debate, centered in the cadaver. Catholics believed that saints' relics, the defining aspect of Medieval Latin Christianity, worked because some link remained between the soul in heaven and the body on earth. Requiem masses and Purgatory, and the indulgences that incensed the reformers, posited the existence of a middle space between heaven and hell where the fate of the deceased soul could still be influenced by the actions of the living. The death culture the Reformation rejected therefore, was one of highly permeable boundaries between the dead and the living, where the living could influence the dead and vice versa. On a theological level, these bonds were supposedly destroyed by the Reformation, from the most moderate Lutheran and Anglican manifestations, to the most radical Calvinist.

Or was tradition really that easy to break? This thesis will argue, among other things, that certain older popular ideas of the corpse remained within the death-ways of Virginia's settlers and impacted the development of the colonies unique cultural relationship with the corpse. While folk beliefs played their part, Europeans in the early modern era largely lodged their understanding of death and mortal remains within a larger Christian framework of

resurrection, salvation, and the afterlife. Those Christian ideas of the cadaver's importance were reforming rapidly in England in the decades before Europe's explosive entrance into the Atlantic.

Christianity lends itself to questions of the corpse and identity. Like the other Abrahamic religions, it assures the believer not just of a pleasant spiritual afterlife, but of a very physical one in which at the end of time the deceased's body will awaken, rise from its grave, and live again. Furthermore, Christianity holds as its central miracle the disfigurement (through torture), violent crucifixion, death, bodily resurrection, and physical ascension of Jesus Christ. Yet the Bible approaches the issue with some ambiguity. As Christians tried to understand the cadaver and its importance to salvation, they were forced to reconcile contradictory passages. Of all the biblical passages which have influenced Christian thinking, theologians and more popular thinkers throughout the history of the religion have focused the most attention on the Pauline metaphor of the seed:

For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.
 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.
 But every man in his own order. Christ the first fruits, afterward they that are Christ's, at
 his coming [...]
 But some man will say, How are the dead rased up? And with what body doe they
 come?
 Thou foole, that which thou sowest, is not quickened except it die.
 And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare graine, it
 may chance of wheate, or of some other graine.
 But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his owne body.
 All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of
 beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds.
 There are also celestiall bodies, and bodies terrestriall: But the glorie of the celestiall is
 one, and the glorie of the terrestriall is another.
 There is one glory of the sunne, another of the moone, and another glorie of the starres:
 for one starre differeth from another starre in glorie.
 So also is the resurrection of the dead, it is sowed in corruption, it is raised in
 incorruption.
 It is sowed in dishonour, it is rased in glorie: it is sowed in weakenesse, it is rased in
 power.

It is sowed a naturall body, it is raised a spirituall bodie. There is a naturall bodie, and there is a spirituall bodie...

Howbeit that was not first which is spirituall: but that which is naturall, and afterward that which is spirituall.

The first man is of the earth, earthy: The second man is the Lord from heaven.

As is the earthy, such are they that are earthy, and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly [...]

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh & blood cannot inherite the kingdome of God: neither doth corruption inherite incorruption.

Behold, I shew you a mysterie: we shall not all sleepe, but wee shall all be changed,

In a moment, in the twinckling of an eye, at the last trumpe, for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortall must put on immortalitie.

So when this corruptible shall haue put on incorruption, & this mortall shall haue put on immortality, then shall be brought to passe the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victorie...⁶

This passage, however, with its focus on change and difference between the corpse and the resurrected body, clashed with other passages. For instance, in Luke 21:18, Jesus reportedly informed his disciples that, even during the persecutions leading up to the second coming, “there shall not a haire of your head perish.” Christians, therefore, were forced to develop a model of the corpse’s fate while drawing on a body of work which made contradictory promises both of transformation and physical continuity.

Throughout the Christian era both popular opinion and high theology refused to accept the transformative implications of Paul’s seed metaphor, trusting instead in the passages which gave assurance of physical permanence. This refusal caused problems. A particular source of uneasiness was the idea of the Chain of Consumption. If the corpse was devoured by worms, Christians asked, and if those worms were then themselves consumed by birds, which were in turn eaten by humans, how would God reconstruct both individuals if each had a claim on some of the same matter? Despite the fact that a strictly literal interpretation of the resurrection

⁶ 1 Cor. 15: 21 – 54, 1611 KJV. All biblical passages are taken from the 1611 version of the King James Bible.

inherently raised these sorts of questions, the idea that the physical body played an important role in the makeup of “self,” and therefore was a necessary part of resurrection and salvation, proved too strong throughout the fifteen hundred years preceding the Reformation to be discarded. “[C]oncern for material and structural continuity showed remarkable persistence,” Caroline Walker Bynum has written, “even where it seemed almost to require philosophical incoherence, theological equivocation, or aesthetic offensiveness.”⁷

Instead, Catholicism in the later Middle Ages perfected complex theological explanations for popular practices such as the veneration of saints’ relics. In doing so, they helped to assuage nervousness on the part of the believer. If saints’ relics worked, then dissolution had been conquered. Or as Bynum has explained, “if a mere fragment of Stephan cured the sick and raised the dead, it could not be less than the whole martyr. And if this tiny bit was already whole in Hippo, how can we think that any piece will be missing when the trumpet sounds?”⁸ The miraculous powers of the saints, and their ability to remain whole in each piece of their bodies, reassured Christians that they, and not some new transformed and inherently different self, would be resurrected at the end of time. Through the example of the saints, Christians could reconcile the importance of body to identity with its natural tendency toward decay.

The Reformation untied the knot with which the Catholic Church had joined the soul and body. Elaborate funeral services, churchyard burials, masses for the dead, and the reassuring solidity of saints’ relics lost their effectiveness for Englishmen as the belief in Purgatory waned during the sixteenth century. What the Reformation did not change, however, were the

⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200- 1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 11.

⁸ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 106.

underlying fears and insecurities which Catholic dogma had developed to assuage. In fact, there is evidence that these fears instead intensified. Robert N. Watson has argued that literature during the English Renaissance and Reformation revealed a crisis occasioned by “the fear of death as annihilation” which was “discernable in both Shakespearean drama, which criticizes and parodies traditional promises of immortality, and Metaphysical poetry, which experiments with new versions of those promises.”⁹ This arose, Watson argues, following Philip Ariés and Clare Gittings, from the intersection of rising individuality and the insecurity inherent in the Protestant reworking of traditional death-ways. Or as he puts it, “assurance about personal salvation was declining while attachment to both the external properties and the internal subjectivities of the human individual were increasing.”¹⁰ The Protestant attack on saints’ relics, for instance, not only undercut the authority of the Church but also “forbade the hope that piety might somehow exempt the body from physical decay,” a possibility the Catholic Church had held only for the miraculous corpses of saints, but which had important implications among the less theologically sophisticated.

This fact and the refusal to abandon this traditional belief in the body as an integral part of the self, can be most readily observed in the persistence of the semi-heretical idea of “soul–sleep,” among Englishmen of all social classes.¹¹ Expressly refuted by Calvin but endorsed by Luther, the idea of “soul–sleep” or “psychopannychism” was the belief that the soul sleeps between death and the future resurrection. Often this belief was further expressed by an understanding of the buried cadaver as the whole person merely asleep, with the soul and body

⁹ Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁰ Watson, *The Rest is Silence*, 2.

¹¹ Watson, *The Rest is Silence*, 5.

somehow slumbering together. An old belief that some historians have traced to the earliest days of Christianity, the survival of soul-sleep among Englishmen shows how central the conception of the individual as a psychosomatic unity of body and spirit was throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is distinctly possible that the Catholic belief in the incorruptible remains of saints grew from this folk belief, as most evidence suggests that theologians were responding to already existing popular observance when they developed justifications for this practice. This belief was strengthened by the Reformation, as it allowed Protestant believer to retain a close connection between the spirit of the deceased and his worldly remains, while eliminating the no longer acceptable doctrine of Purgatory.

Despite Luther's support of the idea of soul-sleep, however, in England it remained outside of orthodoxy. While theologians rejected it though, the populace at large did not. Its survival can plainly be perceived in the lengths English theologians took to refute it. William Sherlock, for instance, wrote that "when we die, we do not fall into Nothing, or into a profound sleep, into a state of Silence and Insensibility till the Resurrection; but we only change our place."¹² While Sherlock stated that "I shall not go about to prove these Things, but take it for granted, That you believe them, for that we leave this World, and that our bodies rot and putrefy in the Grave, needs no Proof, for we see it with our Eyes," he then spent the entirety of the first of his wildly popular works' four chapters defending, explaining, and expanding on the very fact that he claimed he would take for granted, revealing that he could not, in fact, assume his audience's agreement was so easily established.¹³ Moreover, there is one instance from colonial

¹² William Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse Concerning Death*, 12 ed. (1693; reprint, Williamsburg: William Parks, 1744), 4-5, Eighteenth Century Collection Online.

¹³ Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse*, 4.

Virginia, which shows the survival of at least the idea of soul-sleep. In his commonplace book, William Byrd II wrote that “some sages are of the opinion that the Dead only dream in their Graves, till the Day of Judgment. Those that have lived well dream of all the Pleasures of Paradise: but those who have been wicked, of fury, Harpys and all the torments of hell.”¹⁴

While it is unreasonable to suggest that many early modern Englishmen possessed a sophisticated scholarly concept of psychopannychism, the evidence is compelling that folkways survived which drew a significantly less distinct boundary between living and dead bodies than the one popular today. It was widely accepted that what happened to the corpse could impact the whole person, because the body was an integral part of the self. Many women, for instance, recorded desires that their bodies not be embalmed after death, not on account of any unnaturalness, but from an avowed fear that to have their bodies so intimately revealed to male embalmers would negate a lifetime of chastity.¹⁵ Corpses could also be arrested and kept from burial, for debts due at the time of death.¹⁶

Most starkly, however, were the uses to which the state put the corpses of criminals and traitors. Throughout the early modern period in England, the state utilized the criminal body as a site for the illustrative expression of government power. Traitors were dismembered in public before their fragmented corpses were displayed to the public. These pieces of body were often submitted to crude forms of preservation such as boiling in oil. While saints’ bodies were often

¹⁴ William Byrd II, *The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover*, eds. Kevin Berland, Jan Christian Gilliam and Kenneth A. Lockridge (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 142.

¹⁵ Patricia Phillippy, *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 55-56.

¹⁶ Watson, *The Rest is Silence*, 4, and Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 66.

divided into separate (and often far removed) relics and the aristocracy had routinely practiced *mos teutonicus* (the division of the cadaver and its burial in multiple locations) since the Middle Ages (either to draw a parallel between themselves and the saints or to receive the prayers of multiple institutions), this was apparently the only instance in which *non-elite* corpses were preserved in an intentionally fragmented state.¹⁷ The basis for both practices was the same. While saints' relics and the scattered bodies of kings triumphed over disintegration by their ability to retain presence and identity despite fragmentation through miraculous means, the dismembered corpses of criminals slowly and publicly decomposed, possessing meaning because they were expressive examples of the failure to overcome bodily disintegration. The exposure of the gradual putrefaction of an individual graphically displayed the fact that the state's power to punish did not end at the moment of death.

This impulse to punish the corpse could extend even beyond burial, as the corpses of those who had fallen out of political favor after death were occasionally disinterred, displayed, and often dismembered; as happened in 1661 to the bodies of parliamentarian leaders Cromwell, Ireton, and Bradshaw.¹⁸ In other instances, the punishments inflicted on criminals were expressly physical, such as in the case of John Owen, executed in 1615 for stating that the Pope's excommunication of the king rendered regicide lawful. Owen was sentenced to be: "[...] drawn to execution, for as much as he is not worthy to walk upon the earth: 2. His privy members cut

¹⁷ While churchyard overcrowding meant that by the late Middle Ages most European commoners could expect that their bones would eventually be disinterred and placed within a charnel house, there is no evidence that this was the preferred fate of a corpse. Instead, the charnel house seems to have been an attempt to provide as much material survival of the cadaver as possible within the limits imposed by the demand for churchyard burial and limited space.

¹⁸ Gittings, *Death*, 70 – 71.

off ... which shows that his issue is disinherited with the corruption of blood [...] 3. His bowels burned because in them he hatched the treason: 4. Beheaded: 5. Dismembered.”¹⁹

Counterintuitively, the Reformation contributed to this obscuring of the line between the living and the dead. The Catholic tradition which had developed in the late medieval period, most clearly expressed in the *Ars Moriendi* (“the Art of Dying”) manuals which remained something of their popularity even after the Reformation, placed significant importance on the moment of death. Death as a discrete event was understood as the defining instant for determining a soul’s fate. The dying struggled with temptation and dread in a battle with demons to determine the destination of his soul, helped by the priest through the sacrament of extreme unction. The Protestant rejection of extreme unction and revival of the ancient Christian doctrine of predestination radically reduced the importance of death bed spiritual struggles in determining the destiny of the soul.²⁰

Interestingly, in the reworking of the “good death” among English Protestants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the exact moment of death lessened in importance, since the dying could no longer determine their own fate through a final struggle with demons. Death as an event expanded, retaining most if not all of the external aspects of a traditional good death but set them into a single performed ritual extending from the moment the dying took to bed through burial and it could be argued, beyond. The ideal “good death” for early, English Protestants was calm and domestic as before. It should not be sudden, and the dying individual ought to have

¹⁹ Quoted in Gittings, *Death*, 70.

²⁰David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press), 22.

time to reconcile himself to his family, friends, and dependents. The dying should be stoic in the face of death and resigned to the will of God.²¹ All of these aspects of a “good” death were defined well before the advent of the Reformation, but without a single event to anchor the transition, the meaning beneath the actions changed. After the Reformation, death ceased being a discrete event in which the dying struggled to choose between damnation and bliss. Instead, final illness and death were extended into a formulaic procedure during which the dying could show through their response to their impending demise that they were among God’s elect with salvation already assured. Death became a process with no clearly defined end or even apex, a fact which helps to explain the survival of death-ways at odds with supposed Protestant disregard for the corpse. This process would develop further the farther Englishmen were removed from Catholicism, and by the eighteenth century the increasing enthusiasm for naturalistic explanations of death meant that “the ‘good’ death came to be seen, not as the supreme trial of Christian fortitude encapsulated within a discrete moment, but rather as a transition made as peaceful and free from pain and fear as possible.”²²

The religious debates within the English Reformation during the sixteenth century contributed to the growing insecurity about bodily dissolution and the survival of identity among the early American colonists. Puritanism, a catchall term for Englishmen who desired a more thorough cleansing of “Papism” from the English Church and the inclusion of a more radical Calvinism, was defined, both by the Puritans themselves and more moderate Anglicans, partly by Calvinist rejection of concern for the corpse. Even among Anglicans, Reformation theology

²¹ Lucinda McCray Beier, “The Good Death in Seventeenth-century England,” in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (London: Routledge, 1989), 47.

²² Ralph Houlbrooke, introduction to *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, 11.

demanded at least a rhetorical disdain for concerns with bodily dissolution. In 1631, John Weever, Anglican poet and writer, dismissed out of hand fears of annihilation and attendant questions of resurrection using the same vocabulary as the medieval theologians who had so struggled with these very same questions:

Our faith is not so fraile as to thinke that the ravenous beasts can deprive the body of any part to bee wanting in the resurrection; where not a haire of the head shall be missing; a new restitution of our whole bodies being promised to all of us in a moment, not onely of the earth alone, but even out of the most secret angles of all the other elements, wherein anybody is, or can be possibly included.²³

Many Calvinist thinkers went even farther in their disregard of the corpse's fate. Robert Bolton, for instance, heaped scorn upon the cadaver, writing that "Thy body, when the soul is gone, will be an horror to all that behold it; a most loathsome and abhorred spectacle. Those that loved it most, cannot now find it in their hearts to look upon it. Down it must into a pit of carrions and confusion, covered with worms [...] and so moulder away into rottenness and dust."²⁴

Even the burial services of Anglican Protestants, already greatly simplified from their Catholic origins, were criticized as too ceremonial by the more radical reformers. *A Directory for the Public Worship of God*, the 1645 Puritan replacement for the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, stated that "when any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of Buriall, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for publique Buriall, and there immediately interred, without any Ceremony."²⁵

²³ John Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (London, 1631), 31, and Quoted in Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 100-101.

²⁴ Quoted in Gittings, *Death*, 47.

²⁵ *A Directory For the Publique Worship of God* (London, 1646), 35. Quoted in Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 101.

Despite the stark nature of each side's theological pronouncements, it is worth questioning just how much of an impact the more extreme elements of Puritanism had on the burial practices of the English public. Historian Clare Gittings has argued in *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* that historians have been too quick to trust contemporary accounts of radically simplified burials, often mistaking religious polemic for fact. Instead, she notes that a careful reading of probate accounts shows that "average funeral costs were not decreasing generally during these decades," and in fact "it would seem that the average expenditure on funerals actually increased during the first half of the seventeenth century," in several counties.²⁶

Still many Puritan groups had their own cemeteries which were explicitly set apart from sanctified ground. Any person who had seen a Puritan funeral was well aware of its simplicity compared to even the truncated Anglican service. Their practices would, therefore, have influenced the actions of Anglicans who exaggerated the difference in burial as they increasingly came to define themselves by the dissimilarities between the two Protestant traditions. Gittings, in fact, finds the only change in the "general attitude towards burial" to be increased stress on "decent burial," and writes that "this justification of 'decency', not found in previous accounts, might well reflect conscious resistance to the new, simpler form of burial."²⁷ Gittings persuasively argues that "decent" burial meant at least what church records tell us was provided to the unknown indigent: burial in sacred ground, a post-burial meal, and increasingly, by the later seventeenth century, a coffin.²⁸ "Any society which accorded its poorest members this

²⁶ Gittings, *Death*, 52.

²⁷ Gittings, *Death*, 54.

²⁸ Gittings, *Death*, 61.

degree of dignity at their funerals,” she points out, “must certainly have held decent burial at a premium.”²⁹

In the later seventeenth century coffin burial became widespread in England and “the provision of more durable gravestones in the churchyard, and grave slabs in the church, seems to have become much more common from the seventeenth century onwards.”³⁰ Gittings has argued that this increase in the usage of coffins “suggests that the graphic immediacy of shoveling soil directly onto the corpse was becoming less acceptable, the full realization of the process of physical decay being somewhat masked by the wooden coffin.”³¹ This “increased sensitivity towards human decomposition,” she contends, “reflects a growing concept of the self and its individuality.”³²

Furthermore, the place of burial retained its importance to seventeenth-century Englishmen, despite the fact that acceptance of Protestant theology meant that most ceased including requests for specific burial places in their wills.³³ Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English society went to great lengths to ensure Christian burial in sacred ground to everyone, with the notable exception of those (such as murderers, suicides, Catholics, traitors and unbaptized infants) whose passing had in some way placed them outside the bounds of a “good death”. Even in these exceptions, however, the place of burial held importance. The

²⁹ Gittings, *Death*, 63.

³⁰ Houlbrooke, “Death, Church, and Family,” 39.

³¹ Gittings, *Death*, 114.

³² Gittings, *Death*, 114.

³³ Houlbrooke, “Introduction,” 20.

burial of murderers and traitors outside of sacred ground emphasized how important burial in sacred space was to the population at large. Though unbaptized infants were not considered fully human in seventeenth-century England, midwives were still required to swear that, “If any child be deadborn, you yourself shall see it buried in such a secret place as neither hog, dog nor any other beast may come unto it [...] you shall not suffer any such child to be cast into the lanes or any other inconvenient place.”³⁴ Even in during plague years, moreover, people made an effort to provide “decent” burial to the deceased even when doing so exposed the living to possible contagion. Englishmen only resorted to Plague pits and other forms of mass burial when the amount of dead overwhelmed the ability of the living to bury them.³⁵

The colonists who first settled the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay in 1607 brought with them multifaceted and sometimes contradictory ideas about the corpse, burial, and resurrection. These ideas were moreover in upheaval, shot through with anxiety caused by the Reformation’s attack on traditional burial rituals and ideas about the afterlife. The English society from which they came was in the process of redefining its relationship with the dead. The Calvinist rejection of the role of the corpse’s condition in spiritual immortality led to an Anglican response which intensified tendencies toward corpse preservation. In which the rejection of an intermediate location of the departed soul between heaven and hell reinforced the concept of identity as present within the remains of the deceased. However, one constant remained which would have a defining impact on the development of Virginian death-ways. The colonists believed in a unified self, in which the fate of the body was in some ill-defined way connected to the fate of the soul, and ultimately the fate of the complete individual. This belief,

³⁴ Quoted in Gittings, *Death*, 82 -83.

³⁵ Gittings, *Death*, 78-79.

of which soul-sleep was one manifestation, would go on to play a pivotal role in how the colonists created their new death-ways.

As unstable as seventeenth-century English death-ways were, they would be subjected to greater strain by the realities of settlement in the New World. Virginia's early colonists found themselves forced to contend with death rates drastically higher than those in England, the struggle necessary to preform basic death rituals half a world away from home, and the constant possibility of the disappearance, desecration, mutilation, or even cannibalism of the body inherent in the wilderness of the New World. When this jumble of ideas and influences was added to the interaction with strange, new, native cultural approaches to the remains of the dead, English death-ways were molded into something similar, but fundamentally different than what they had been before.

Chapter One: Bad Beginnings

The colonists who first settled at Jamestown arrived from England with an understanding of the corpse which was in unusual flux. While the direct Puritan influence on the colony was slight, the nation the colonists had left was in religious turmoil, with tensions between Anglican and Reformed Protestantism soon to be near breaking point. While both branches of Protestantism explicitly rejected the Catholic relationship with the corpse and the idea that the prayers of the living could impact the destiny of the dead, Puritanism rejected not only prayer for the dead also but the very idea that the Church had any legitimate role to play with the corpse at all.³⁶ Anglicanism, the denomination of the vast majority of Virginia's early settlers, rejected

³⁶ Brent Warren Tharp, "Preserving Their Forms and Features: The Role of Coffins in the American Understanding of Death." (PhD diss., The Collage of William and Mary, 1996), 41-42.

funeral masses and the concept of Purgatory, but was not willing to jettison all of the beliefs, rituals and relationships surrounding the corpse that had been such a central feature of Medieval Christianity.

Still, Anglicanism itself was at this time in flux, vacillating between tendencies toward Calvinist predestination and Arminian free-will, a tension reflected in Article XVII of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which, as historian Patrick Butler points out, “recognizes predestination but treated predestination as a mysterious act of God, beyond the power of human apprehension and offered hope to all.”³⁷ Anglicanism understood the literal physical resurrection of the corpse at Judgment Day as central to their conception of redemption.³⁸ While never as stark as Puritan burials, the Reformation did not pass Anglicanism without greatly simplifying its burial rituals. The result of this ambiguity has been, with a few notable exceptions, overlooked by most historians who have covered Virginia’s death-ways.

Virginians thinking on the sacred significance of the corpse developed in an atmosphere almost devoid of clergy. As Lauren F. Winner points out, “for most of the seventeenth century, Virginia experienced a severe clergy shortage: in 1661, some twenty-six thousand Virginians relied upon the ministrations of twelve Anglican clerics.”³⁹ The lack of sufficient Anglican clergy was not solved until the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁰ This meant that while the Anglican Church dominated the forms and contours of religious thinking in the colony, its influence was distant. Virginians had greater freedom than Englishmen back home with which

³⁷ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 4.

³⁸ Tharp, “Preserving,” 37-38.

³⁹ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 7.

⁴⁰ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 7.

to interact with the corpse. As long as the forms of Anglican piety as outlined in the *Book of Common Prayer* were observed, the intangible undercurrents beneath those forms could develop largely on their own. Even the forms could be played with, as shown by Virginian's stubborn refusal to abandon private burial in the face of clerical disapproval. While remaining within Anglicanism early Virginian colonists had a wide flexibility in how they approached the remains of the deceased. A flexibility they made use of when confronted by the presence of the untamed, and seemingly untamable, death of seventeenth-century Virginia.

That Jamestown was a death trap is so well known that it needs only the broadest outline here. An unhealthy environment and an unwillingness, or inability, to produce enough food caused startling death rates in the early years of settlement. Those death rates were high enough that the dead sometimes went unburied, with the early settlers often subjected to the sight of corpses in varying states of decay. The rotting and unburied corpse invoked powerful images in the English mind of disorder, as contemporary English authors "used unburied corpses as evidence of the most chaotic times: bloody battles, plague years, and the like."⁴¹

The tie which connected corpses and chaos in the imagination of the early colonists was the displeasure God showed towards the undermining of legitimate authority. John Smith, in one of the earliest writings concerning the Virginia settlement, drew attention to rebellion as the cause of God's displeasure. After describing the infighting of the colony's leaders, which he blamed on a failure of leadership, Smith wrote, "through which disorder God (being angry with us) plagued us with such famin and sickness, that the living were scarece able to bury the

⁴¹ Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 80-81.

dead.”⁴² Further, the possibility of death in the wilderness, via accident, disease, starvation or Native-American attack, added the possibility of bodies left unburied forever. For seventeenth-century Englishmen the loss of the corpse, through whatever means, without a grave to visit or rituals to enact, unmoored the grieving and remembering process from its central focal point and exaggerated the already difficult detachment between the dead and the living, while also effectively annihilating the lost individual. In a society in which the majority of the population was illiterate and therefore unable to enshrine its dead in obituaries or family Bibles, physical remains possessed an importance hard for modern Americans to comprehend. The possibility of this most permanent of deaths, death without any site for remembrance, had a distinct impact on Virginians’ understanding of the corpse.

Even those bodies which had been securely buried were not out of danger. While Smith was not a disinterested party when it came to the leadership squabbles at Jamestown, his choice of language and understanding of causation help to understand the underlying conceptions of the body among the Englishmen who found themselves isolated and in constant danger on an alien shore. Almost twenty years after *A True Relation*, when Smith turned again to the colony in the fourth book of his *General Historie of Virginia*, he engaged the language of cannibalism within the first few pages to describe the state of the colony during the Starving Times. Though he had not himself witnessed them, he wrote that:

Nay, so great was our famine, that a Salvage we slew and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up a againe and eat him; and so did divers one another boyled and stewed with roots and herbs: and one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was knowne; for which hee was executed, as hee well deserved: now whether shee was better roasted,

⁴² John Smith, “A True Relation, By Captain John Smith, 1608,” in *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625*, Lyon G. Tyler, ed., (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc, 1946), 36.

boyled or carbonado's, I know not; but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of. This was that time, which still to this day we called the starving time.⁴³

Smith's dark humor and propensity to use his works to blame his rivals for the disasters that befell the colony make it tempting to dismiss the story of the man who killed and ate his wife as another instance of Smith's hyperbolic prose. The same incident, however, was related by a man who was often the colony's leader during the "Starving Time": George Percy.⁴⁴ No friend of Smith's, Percy's "A Trewe Relacyon," was written to counter Smith's work. The fact that both men related the same story and that Percy's work was a private letter to the Lord Percy (his brother), makes its veracity almost certain and points to its having been a widely-known story about the colony's early days.⁴⁵ Percy, who had more cause than most to minimize the cannibalism under his leadership, agreed with Smith that the consumption of European bodies extended beyond this incident, writing that some colonists were so overcome with hunger "[a]s to digge up dead cospes out of graves and to eate them and some have licked upp the bloode which hath fallen from their weake fellowes."⁴⁶

The early settlers did not just see the displeasure of God in the victims of cannibalism. Animals uncovered and ate poorly buried remains, a problem of particular importance in Virginia where plantation agriculture and the wide availability of land encouraged the dispersal of settlements, and this also carried considerable meaning to the colonists. The fate of two corpses highlighted this fact: Hughe Pryce, a "Leane spare man [...] pinched with extreme

⁴³ John Smith, "The General Histotrie of Virginia by Captain John Smith, 1624; The Fourth Booke," in *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625*, ed. Lyon G. Tyler (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc, 1946), 295.

⁴⁴ George Percy, "A Trewe Relacyon: Virginia from 1609-1612," *Tylers Quarterly Magazine* 3, 1921-1922, 267.

⁴⁵ Percy, "A Trewe Relacyon," 259.

⁴⁶ Percy, "A Trewe Relacyon," 267.

hunger,” and an unnamed “Butcher A corpulentt fatt man.”⁴⁷ Native-Americans killed both men while they attempted to forage for food in the forest during the worst of the lean years. Though they had been killed together, the fate of their corpses could not have been more different. The body of Preece, who had earlier “in A furious distracted moode did come openly into the market place Blasphemeinge exclaiming and crying out that there was noe God,” was found “Rent in pieces by wolves or oother wylde Beasts And his Bowles Torne out of his boddy.”⁴⁸ The obese butcher, however, though his body was found close by, lay untouched. While undoubtedly an exaggeration of a less expressly didactic incident (how exactly Jamestown’s starving population could include the grossly overweight unnamed “Butcher” was not made clear), Percy found this incident of the “iuste Judgment” of God was so important that he interrupted his narrative to devote a significant chunk of his *Relacyon* to it.

Native-Americans death-ways are much harder to ferret out of the texts, both because they left none of their own and because colonist accounts were heavily mediated. Only the most Eurocentric of commenters, though, made the mistake of seeing Natives as merely a part of the environment, a thing to be acted upon, a cause of a colonist’s death, or an object for starvation induced cannibalism. This was particularly true among those who had actually lived in, and in Smith and Percy’s case had led, the colony. For those attempting to build a home in the far flung settlements of Virginia, outnumbered and surrounded by Native-Americans, at least some understanding of Native culture was a requirement for survival.

⁴⁷ Percy, “A Trewe Relacyon,” 269.

⁴⁸ Percy, “A Trewe Relacyon,” 269.

As Erick Seeman points out, English and Native death-ways included “cultural parallels that facilitated communication across cultural boundaries.”⁴⁹ As Seeman further highlights, this cross-cultural communication often took place during warfare.⁵⁰ Native-Americans and the English colonists both understood the power that mutilation and corpse desecration could have in warfare. Both cultures understood the imaginative power of gruesome torture. Both also understood the importance of particular, high status bodies. In order to avenge the death of two English messengers, for example, the colonists at one point captured an Indian town and, in a scene reminiscent of the destruction of saints’ tombs by Protestants during the Wars of Religion, “burned their howses Ransaked their Temples Tooke downe the Corpes of their deade kings from of their toambes And caryed away their pearles Cop[indistinguishable] and bracelets, wherewith they dow decore their kings funeralles.”⁵¹

While the attack could have been simple retribution for the two white men’s deaths, the brutality that occurred may have been occasioned by the fact that the colonists were told that the messengers had been “sacrifysed And Hatt their Braynes weare cut and skraped out of their heads with mussel shelles.”⁵² The English mind associated corpse desecration with “the humiliation of the infamous,” and early modern English history was full of instances where “killing miscreants was often not enough. Corpses were subjected to state sanctioned violence. Heads were lopped off and placed on poles, genitals cut off and thrown to pigs, limbs severed.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Seeman, *Death in The New World*, 4.

⁵⁰ Seeman, *Death in The New World*, 85-87.

⁵¹ Percey, “A Trewe Relacyon,” 263.

⁵² Percey, “A Trewe Relacyon,” 263.

⁵³ Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 85.

When political fortunes changed after the death of now infamous individuals, their bodies were often disinterred in order to enact this destruction. The colonists brought this tradition with them as well, with Nathaniel Bacon's body escaping posthumous mutilation after the failure of his revolt only because his grave could not be found.⁵⁴

The violent destruction of the body quickly became a defining feature of the fighting between colonists and Natives, and both groups showed a casual familiarity with, and acceptance of, torture and corpse desecration. It is clear from the sources that Native Americans in the Virginia area either understood power of corpse mutilation and torture, or that they quickly adapted to the sensibilities of the colonists they were in conflict with. This would be made startlingly clear in an event so traumatizing that it has been referred to as "Virginia's second start": the massacre of 1622.

On March 22nd, 1622, the Native tribes attacked the settlements of Virginia in an uprising so violent that it left a third of the colonists dead, almost destroying the struggling colony. The official report from London accused the Indians not only of torture and the murder of women and children, but also of widespread corpse desecration. After killing their victims, the Indians, "fell againe upon the dead, making as well as they could, a fresh murder, defacing, dragging and mangling the dead carkasses into many pieces, and carrying some parts away in derision, with base and brutish triumph."⁵⁵ Archeology at the site of Wolstenholme Towne at Martin's Hundred, one of the hardest hit of the settlements, has produced physical evidence that corroborates the brutality of the attack. One set of remains which Ivor Noël Hume has

⁵⁴ Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 85.

⁵⁵ Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1906-1935), 3: 551.

convincingly argued came from the massacre shows evidence of a violent blow to the forehead with a European shovel, confirmation that contemporary accounts of the Native Americans using the colonists' own tools in the slaughter were factual.⁵⁶ The dig at Martin's Hundred unearthed several other groups of human remains which had been hastily buried, often without coffin, and in clothes instead of in the traditional winding sheet, in graves that in at least one case show signs of having been disturbed later by animals.⁵⁷

One skeleton uncovered at the site reveals the only extant evidence of the fate that terrified seventeenth-century Englishmen: the loss of the body. The skeleton of a 40-year-old woman was found not far from two of the hastily dug graves. The woman, however, had not been buried at all. Found at the top of a contemporary trash pit:

She lay on her right side, her left arm across her chest and its hand clenched, her right hand up to her head, and her legs parted due to the right having settled deeper into the mud than the left [...] The only explanation that did not pose as many questions as it answered was that Granny [the name the archeologists had given the skeleton] took herself into the pit and died there, out of sight of her neighbors, who expected to find her body inside the compound. When they could not find her, they assumed that she had either burned to death in the house or had been carried off by Indians, and so never thought to search beyond the fences.⁵⁸

A corpse lost to the wilderness could not be given the proper burial so important to seventeenth-century Europeans, a drive that was so strong the survivors buried every corpse they discovered despite the danger. Even if haste or fear meant that the corpses were buried shallowly, they had been buried. The fact that the other massacre victims had been buried even when circumstances

⁵⁶ Ivor Noël Hume, *Martin's Hundred* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 244.

⁵⁷ Hume, *Martin's Hundred*, 277.

⁵⁸ Hume, *Martin's Hundred*, 284-290.

precluded the fully proper care for the corpse underscores how important burial was to the colonists.

In the search for and burial of bodies after the massacre, “Granny” was missed, and she shows what could happen to anyone at any time in the early colony: the disappearance of her corpse. This disappearance raised unnerving ideas surrounding the possibility of the extinguishing of the self, while at the same time utterly upsetting the familiar English rites of commemoration and burial. The records of the colony give further evidence that the chaotic nature of the colony in the aftermath of the uprising led to periods in which even shallow burial was impossible, a fact which further darkened Virginia’s already bad reputation abroad. When the *Abigail*, infested with disease, arrived in Jamestown soon after the massacre, corpses of the dead lay unburied, having been left so long that they were deign devoured by hogs.⁵⁹ This as well made it into English accounts of Virginia. Every time that the early colony was in trouble it seems, the colonists and the Company members in England expressed that chaos through language intimately concerned with the corpse and its proper, or improper, disposal. Virginia, much more so than the other British colonies, developed a reputation as a land of chaos and, in the imaginations of contemporary society as well as in fact, of unburied and consumed corpses. This helps to explain why Percy began his “Trew Relacyon” with a list of other colonial efforts that had gone disastrously wrong, adding the argument that Virginia had not faired noticeably worse than any of the others. Markedly Percy included in this list a Spanish plantation in which “Exteremety of hunger,” first caused mutinies, and, after the mutineers had been hung, drove the colonists, “in the night to cut downe Their dead fellows from of the gallowes and bury them in

⁵⁹ Kingsbury, *The Records of the Virginia Company*, 4: 215.

their hungry Bowls.”⁶⁰ England’s Catholic nemesis was not above lawlessness and cannibalism either, Percy assured his readers.

After the disasters of the early seventeenth century, the colony had a problem. No settlement could survive if it offered only grisly death, and the possibility of no Christian burial as well. The colonists and their supporters made sense of the situation by looking back to one of the colony’s primary purposes for a framework within which to understand the violence and rotting corpses abandoned to animals and starving men. Perhaps popular belief, Douglas Bradburn as argued that Virginia was never primarily an economic venture. For the English, he contends, Jamestown and the other early settlements that grew from it were “an important front in the long struggle between Satan and the Saints.”⁶¹ Jamestown was intended to be the first spark of a fire that would sweep across the continent as natives threw themselves, without missionary toil on the part of their deliveries, into acceptance of the purified gospel. Once converted, the thinking went, the natives would help to build a new, Protestant, empire of God in the new world, a counter to the devilish empire erected by the Spanish to the south and in the East Indies. It was, after all. “the wealth of the Indies [which] allowed Philip II to harass the Protestants of the Low Countries, ... torture and murder English sailors the world over, and enslave the natives of the Americas, all in the service of ‘Great Anti-Christ of Rome.’”⁶² With their own Protestant empire, the Catholic enemy could be met and defeated.

⁶⁰ Percy, *A Trewe Relacyon*, 260-261.

⁶¹ Douglas Bradburn, “The Eschatological Origins of the English Empire,” in *Early Modern Virginia: Reconsidering the Old Dominion*, ed. Douglas Bradburn and John C. Coombs (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 15.

⁶² Bradburn, “The Eschatological Origins,” 20.

Within this worldview which saw England and the new British empire, as the vessel through which God would bring his true children to mastery of the world, it was not hard to find precedent in the Bible for the suffering of his people. The terrorized colonists became, once the fantasy of easy conversion of the Native population had evaporated, the Jews of the book of Nehemiah, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem with their weapons in one hand and their tools in the other. Or in the case of Virginia, as one survivor mournfully wrote, “working without our hoe in one hand *and* our Peece or sword in the other.”⁶³ This made the deaths easier to bear for Englishmen at home and in the colony, and kept alive the idea of religious mission. The Virginian dead became martyrs and martyrs, as everyone knew, transcended the need for an intact corpse or a Christian burial. As William Sherlock pointed out in his late-seventeenth-century work *A Practical Discourse on Death*, which probate records tell us was wildly popular in both England and Virginia:

But the highest Honor we can do these Bodies and noblest use we can put them to, is to offer them up in a proper sense a sacrifice to God, that is, willingly and Chearfully to die for God when he calls us to suffering: First to offer up our Souls to God in the pure Flames of love and Devotion, *and then Freely to give up our bodies to the stake or the Gibbet, to wild Beasts, or more savage men.* This Vidicates our Bodies from the Natural Shame and Reproach of Death.⁶⁴

By sanctifying the mission, the unburied or consumed cadavers had been themselves sanctified. Unlike the “thin man” of Percy’s *Trewe Relaycon*, the violent mutilation and possible cannibalism or consumption by animals of the settlers corpses spoke not to Gods displeasure but instead of the sanctity of the colonial mission. This was especially powerful to those who knew

⁶³ Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus; or Purchas his Pilgrimes, Containing a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others*, 26 vols. (New York, 1906), 19:102-3; and Bradburn, “The Eschatological Origins,” 36.

⁶⁴ Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse on Death*, 58-59.

of the Marian persecutions fifty years before, or had been raised on Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. It had the added benefit of also neatly reconciling the Protestant mission with the serious setbacks of the colony's early years.

Within the context of the religious mission to found a Protestant empire in the Americas however, martyrdom was an explanation which demanded its own end. Put another way, martyrdom worked as a symbol of God's favor only if it later gave way to stability and the resumption of more traditionally valid relationships with the body. The Hebrew tribes had conquered Israel; the English would do the same in Virginia. Once they had, martyrdom would no longer provide an easy explanation for missing and mutilated corpses. If missing, exposed or consumed corpses remained a part of Virginia life for too long they would lose their sanctifying quality, and again become symbols of failure and divine displeasure. The dead had to be quieted.

The ways the colonists went about trying to establish these stable relationships highlights what about the preceding years they had found most threatening. In 1624, only one year since the massacre had posed a threat to the continued existence of their society, the House of Burgesses turned in their first act to regulating the corpse.⁶⁵ This act included the requirement that each plantation set aside a space for a church and "A place empaled in, sequestered only to the burial of the dead."⁶⁶ The timing indicates that the massacres had raised serious concerns among the settlers regarding the proper care of cadavers. It also points to a distaste among the elite members of the population with the practice of private home burials outside of the sacred earth of the churchyard.

⁶⁵ Tharp, *Preserving Their Forms*, 59.

⁶⁶ William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large, Being a collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First session of the Legislature in the year 1619*, 13 Vol., (New York, 1823), 1:122-123.

Private burial, a unique aspect of Virginia death-ways often commented on throughout the colonial period, is believed to have begun as soon as the colony expanded beyond the confines of Jamestown. However, much of the surviving evidence for home burial can only be traced back to the massacre of 1622. At Martin's Hundred for instance, while a number of burials were found far from the concentration of graves which Hume associated with the site of the plantation's church (since washed away by erosion and the natural changes in the rivers banks) most were linked either to the massacre, its immediate aftermath, or to instances of contagious disease.⁶⁷ While Virginians stubbornly resisted repeated attempts by the Assembly to eliminate private burial, in its earliest manifestations, as we will see below, it was linked not with elite status but with the periods of chaos which retained strong links in the colonial imagination to the improperly cared for corpse. The preference of the colonists for this style of burial then holds immense importance in relation to the question of the corpse and its meaning.

While the 1624 law demanded the connection of burial grounds to ecclesiastical property, the populace generally disregarded the regulation. In 1639, the law was revised, allowing for fenced off burial grounds which, while they remained under church control, had no direct connection to a specific church or holy ground.⁶⁸ In 1662, the Assembly passed a new law which directly addressed issues of both private burial and corpse desecration. Important enough to be quoted at length, the law of 1662 stated that:

WHEREAS the private buriall of servants and others gives occasion of much scandall againste diverse persons and sometimes not undeservedly of being guilty of their deaths, from which if the persons suspected be innocent there can be noe vindication, if guilty noe punishment, by reason they are for the most part buried wiout the knowledge or view of any others than such of the family, as by

⁶⁷ For a map, see Hume, *Martian's Hundred*, 77 and 240.

⁶⁸ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 19, 33 and 141.

neernesse of relation (as being husband wife or children are unwilling) or as servanst are fearfull to make discovery if murther were committed: ffor remedy whereof as alsoe for taking away that barbarous custom of exposing the cops of the dead (by making their graves in common and unfenced places) to the prey of hoggs and other vermine, Be it encated that there be in every parish three or fower or more places appoyneted (according to the greatness or littleness of the same) to be sett apart and fenced in, for places of publique burial, for that precinct, and further that before the corps be buryed there be at least three or fower of the neighbors called who may in case of suspicion view the corps, and if none yet according to the decent custome of all Christendome they may accompany itt to the ground (or grave), And be it further enacted that noe persons whether free or servants shall be buried in any other place than those soe appointed, unless such who by their own appointment in their life time have signified their desires of being interred in any particular place elsewhere.⁶⁹

Though concerned primarily with murder accusations, the 1662 law exposed deep uncertainties among late-seventeenth-century Virginians about how their dead were buried. The fact that the elimination of the “barbarous custom” of leaving a corpse so poorly buried that it was consumed by animals required a law indicates that this practice had continued beyond the massacre of 1622 and the Starving Times. The 1662 law also shows the colonial elite struggling to exert social control through regulation of the dead, with the upper-class assembly attempting to enforce when and how the dead would be buried. As Patrick Butler points out, the law was written in the shadow of the restiveness among indentured servants that would a year later lead to the Berkenhead plot of 1663.⁷⁰ The new law indicated that improper burial was an upsetting issue for the servant class, and points to an increased focus on the correct burial of the white dead.

Practically all historians of colonial Virginia death-ways have given at least passing attention to home burial, each explaining its origins in slightly different ways. Rhys Isaac, in the most influential approach to the subject, argued that the contemporary eighteenth-century

⁶⁹ Hening, *Virginia Statutes*, II, 53 and Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 142-143.

⁷⁰ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 142.

explanation that home burial was a response to the distance between the plantations and churchyards, was insufficient because it failed to note the “notorious propensity of Virginians of all race and ranks to travel far to points of assembly when they were inclined to do so.”⁷¹

Instead, Isaac wrote that home burial acted as a mechanism of elite social control as “the great houses with their family burying grounds beside them came, then, to be set apart as monuments of a precious continuity of generations to which few of the neighboring small plantations, and perhaps none of the slave quarters, could aspire.”⁷² Consideration of the 1662 law, the last to address home burial directly during the colonial period, adds nuance to our understanding of the origins of private burial. Isaac began his book in the middle of the 1740s and so overlooked that, in its earliest manifestations, private burial was associated not with elite status but with murder, disorder, unburied and desecrated corpses, and indentured servitude. Private burial then initially had nothing to do with establishing elite status. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that as soon as the colony spread beyond Jamestown Virginians chose home burial regardless of social status. While the question of home burial will be dealt with in more detail in a later chapter, it is important to realize that however the elite may have used the practice, its origins lay in the dispersal and instability of the early colony. The story of elite private burial was a reworking of home burial as Virginians struggled to fit the ongoing problems in proper corpse care into the idea of an ordered, Christian and civilized society.

In the seventeenth century, starkly literal and unequivocal belief of the bodily resurrection of the corpse stood at the center of Christian faith. This was true of Calvinists, Anglicans, and Catholics. Of the three sentences Smith dedicated to Native death-ways in his

⁷¹ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 1982), 69.

⁷² Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 118.

True Relation, he used one to tell his readers that the Indians “acknowledge no resurrection.”⁷³ Whether this was true or not, its importance to Smith (and one assumes his readers) in his attempt to understand Native culture was highlighted by the fact that it was the only death-way he stated that the Indians *did not do*. While Smith gives no record of what the Native Americans did do, by stressing the missing belief, Smith was implicitly making a comparison between native spirituality and Christianity. This appraisal of Native American religion highlighted its strangeness to a western observer and placed it beyond acceptable belief. Native ritual and belief systems also lacked analogs to many other aspects of Christian practice, and yet the absence of physical resurrection was the only one Smith felt was necessary to relate.

The interest in stories of the consumption of human corpses evident in many reports from the colony’s early days was a sign of a very old difficulty within Christian belief which the colonists had brought with them from Europe. With no Puritan, or Anglican, clergy to enforce strict and correct adherence to the tenets of the Church, the esoteric minutia of theology held little sway among the non-elite in seventeenth-century Virginia. Instead, folk-ways related to the corpse were allowed to survive unimpeded by orthodoxy. These concepts, which were “closer to the medieval Catholic world view than to the new views of either Anglicans or Puritans, were brought into Virginia and continued to develop there, did not require clerical oversight.”⁷⁴ The belief that soul and body remained united in death needed the intervention of the clergy to keep it from growing and, in their absence, it matured into one of the conceptual underpinnings of Virginian imaginative interaction with the corpse.

⁷³ Smith, “True Relation,” 51.

⁷⁴ Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7.

The common belief in the psychosomatic unity of body and spirit made cannibalism not only distasteful but a threat to the soul. As the colony grew and stabilized, the idea that white men had devoured their own became incompatible with the image Virginia's elite wished to embody. An early indication of the contours of these developing death-ways can be seen in the writings of the Virginian Robert Beverley. Less than a hundred years after the disasters which had threatened the existence of the early colony, Beverley directly addressed the question of cannibalism in his *The History and Present State of Virginia*. Published in 1705, Beverley produced his work with the express purpose of correcting the errors of accounts of Virginia then available to the English public; accounts which, Beverley writes, "there's none of 'em either true, or so much as well invented. Such Accounts are as impertinent as ill Pictures, that resemble any Body, as much as the Persons they are drawn for."⁷⁵ As history, Beverley's account relies heavily on John Smith's work. As a primary source, though, Beverley's history is invaluable as a window into the way in which Virginians on the cusp of the eighteenth century understood their history and themselves.

To Beverley the tragedies of the early colony were defined by chaos and misadministration, and the language he used to highlight these facts was closely connected with the corpse. Summing up the history of the Starving Times he wrote:

They continued in these scanty Circumstances till they were at last reduced to such Extremity, as to eat the very Hides of the Horses, and they Bodies of the *Indians* they had killed; and sometimes also upon a Pinch they wou'd not disdain to dig them up again to make a homely Meal of after they had been buried [...] Thus a few Months indiscreet Management brought such a Infamy upon the Country, that to this Day it cannot be wiped away.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Robert Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1947), 9.

⁷⁶ Beverley, *History*, 35. Italics in the original.

The italicization of “Indians” means nothing, as Beverley regularly italicized the word. Despite relying so heavily on Smith, however, Beverley never once directly mentioned the murder, disinterment or consumption of *English* bodies by other whites. His syntax, by adding the fact that they would “dig them up again” immediately after writing of the eating of Indian bodies, instead was formed in a way that addresses the by then well-known narratives of Smith, while avoiding the idea that whites had eaten other colonists. This following of “Indians” by the weak and indistinct “them” represents evidence of a shifting in the imaginative role cannibalism played in understanding the early colony. Beverley could not excise the cannibalism of his home’s founders. It was too well known, an “Infamy upon the Country, that to this Day it cannot be wiped away.”⁷⁷ Almost a hundred years removed for the immediacy of the act however, Beverley felt the need to either ignore, or to address in the most surreptitious way, what was in 1705 already the most scandalous part of the story. While the breaching of the cannibalism taboo had to be admitted, the conceptual blurring of white and red bodies should be avoided, a thing best forgotten. At the same time Beverley, by making Indian bodies the soul object of the broken taboo, denigrated the Native body while also lessening the guilt of the colony’s founders. They had after all, Beverley implied, only eaten Indians, not white men.

While eastern Virginia’s Native population had been reduced to a fragment by the time Beverley wrote his book, he included a detailed description of the way in which the Indians cared for the corpses of their own elite. “The Indians are Religious in preserving the Corpses of their kings and Rulers after Death,” he wrote before providing a detailed description of this preservation.⁷⁸ The description was memorable in that it was designed to both repulse and attract

⁷⁷ Beverley, *History*, 35.

⁷⁸ Beverley, *The History*, 214.

the intended audience, possibly in an attempt to portray Virginia as a place both suitable for and in need of colonization. The process he described included actions which no colonist or European would have associated with proper corpse care. After skinning the corpse and removing “all the Flesh off from the Bones as clean as possible, leaving the sinews fastned to the Bones, that they may preserve the Joynts together,” the flesh was dried in the sun and placed at the foot of the preserved bones and sinews which had been placed back in the skin and sown up into a bag.⁷⁹ The two resulting bundles were then together placed in niches in a special structure where they also placed their “*Quioccos*, or Idol.”⁸⁰ Beverley concluded his description with a phrase which indicated both approval of the intention behind the practice, and dismissal of the Indians themselves, writing “So great an Honor and Veneration have these ignorant and unpolisht people for their Princes, even after they are dead.”⁸¹ Within a culture as hierarchical as Colonial Virginia, “Honor and Veneration” for the bodies of the elite was not evidence of savagery, but civilization. This unsettled understanding of Indian death-ways fit perfectly with Beverley’s schizophrenic desire to both praise and denigrate Native-Americans, a conflict that arose in a society in which Native-Americans were still a real, but quickly receding, threat.

In this case, Beverley was not simply repeating the observations of earlier colonists. Instead, he was speaking from experience, as he had personally investigated an Indian temple and found (and desecrated) a corpse preserved in this manner.⁸² Beverley’s knowledge of, and inquisitive interest in, Native ways of caring for the remains of their leaders undermines the idea

⁷⁹ Beverley, *The History*, 214.

⁸⁰ Beverley, *The History*, 215.

⁸¹ Beverley, *The History*, 215.

⁸² Beverley, *The History*, 197.

that Indian religion existed only to be influenced by and then destroyed by the European Christianity of the settlers. While Seeman argues that the “syncretism,” he sees in American death-ways was a one way interaction in which “Christians and Jews in the Americans experienced only minor changes in their death-ways,” Beverley’s fascination with native death-ways raises serious doubts about how one way it really was.⁸³ By Beverley’s time almost a hundred years of experience had taught the colonists that the Indians of Virginia went to great lengths to preserve the corpses of their most elite dead. Conflict between Indians and whites often included the desecration of important corpses, especially the abuse of the remains of native chiefs. The ability to maintain the physical integrity of one’s own significant dead was a privilege whites gained as a result of their destruction of the native populations, a fact mirrored Beverley’s ability to casually desecrate important native remains. The capacity to maintain the sacredness of burial was indicative then of the ability to control the land and the people on it. The ability to carelessly violate the dead of the Native Americans highlighted similarly exposed white mastery over the land. The seed of the idea that the elite could define their status through corpse centered symbolism of stability had been planted, and would grow as Virginians encountered other instances in which such symbols could be used.

Scattered, surrounded, and separated by an ocean from England, Virginia’s settlers were largely left to themselves to develop their conception of the corpse and the role their remains would play in the lives of the living. While the settlers brought much of the raw material for these conceptions with them, but these conceptions developed in a new environment plagued by chaos and disorder, where systemic warfare, a pestilent environment, and new forms of servitude challenged traditional attitudes and raised questions about stability, the body, and hierarchy

⁸³ Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 7-8.

never encountered in England. The colonists, however, were never entirely cut off from Britain, and as ties with the mother country became more permanent Virginia's elite began to find themselves in the position of defending their society from opinions formed in England during the hard and dangerous times of the early seventeenth century. With a new century, some challenges would end while new ones would begin. A new culture would be introduced which forced white Virginians to reimagine the body yet again. While the conflict between red and white bodies defined the seventeenth century, in the eighteenth century a new dialectic would increasingly come to delineate Virginia's death-ways: the struggle between Euro- and African-Americans to define the correct ways to handle the cadaver.

Chapter Two: A Punishment Worse than Death

As the seventeenth century turned into the eighteenth, Virginian society became increasingly reliant on the forced labor of enslaved West Africans. West Africans brought their own ideas of the corpse to America, ideas molded by the horrors of the slave trade. Recently a few authors have attempted to engage with these notoriously hard to discern beliefs, primarily in an effort to uncover how they intersected with those of the white population and the way this intersection influenced later American ideas about death.⁸⁴ While these recent works are exciting and original, and correct in their shared assertion that despite the cultural plurality of West Africa, enslaved Africans inclined toward shared assumptions about death and the body as they fashioned a new culture, there was one aspect of the source population which has been largely ignored and which deserves to be raised. This was the fact, ignored by almost every author, that, despite the preponderance of animists among the enslaved, a significant portion

⁸⁴ See *The Reaper's Garden* by Vincent Brown, *Death in the New World* (especially chapter 6) by Eric Seeman, and Douglas R. Egerton's "A Particular Mark of Infamy" in *Mortal Remains*, eds. Nancy Isneberg and Andrew Burstein.

must have shared a death-culture shaped primarily not by ancestors and spirits, but by Islam. Once this issue is addressed, the questions about how concepts of white and black remains changed and influenced each other become clearer. A corresponding shift took place within the Euro-Virginian imagination in regards to the corpse. White cadavers, especially during the first half of the eighteenth century, took on a form of sacredness they either lacked in the rest of the British Atlantic World or which they possessed with far less intensity. This sanctifying of the Euro-American corpse was directly proportionate with the degradation of the remains of black animists and Muslims, inherent in their use as locations of power expression.

Not much has been written about Muslims in early America, enslaved or otherwise. The primary documentation is slender, because slave owners rarely commented upon the religious beliefs of their slaves and because much of the Islamic heritage of African-Americans was hidden by later conversion to Christianity, a closely related religion which includes the veneration of the same figures, such as Noah and Abraham, and the adoption of those names by the believer. It was impossible, for example, to distinguish whether a slave received the name Moses because of Christian or Muslim cultural traditions, especially as either was mediated by the Christian Euro-centric traditions of the white American who first recorded the name. The historian Michael Gomez argues, on the other hand, that the recurrence of certain slave names, such as “Sambo” which Gomez asserts was a western corruption of the Fulba name “Samba,” and descriptive terms like “Mandingo,” a western corruption of “Mandinka,” indicated the presence of Africans from heavily Muslim ethnic groups among the enslaved population.⁸⁵ While this strategy is less revealing in Virginia than in South Carolina or Georgia where Muslim

⁸⁵ Michael A. Gomez, “Islam in Early America” in the *Journal of Southern History*, LX, No. 4 (November 1994): 685, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2211064>.

populations were highly concentrated on the rice producing coast, the names and terms Gomez identifies did regularly appear in Virginian sources. The fewer occurrences of Islamic identifiers in Virginia were also caused by the fact that the slave populations of the South Carolina and Georgia coasts were constantly replenished, while Virginia's slave population was self-sustaining and largely acculturated to western norms by the time detailed records began to be kept of the enslaved population.

As a result, there is no consensus of how large the percentage of the enslaved in Virginia were Muslim. Gomez, addressing Islam among the enslaved in his 1994 article "Islam in Early America," concluded that "thousands, if not tens of thousands" of the Africans brought to North American mainland colonies were Muslim, a conclusion he comes to primarily by looking at the areas from which slaves were taken and accounts of individual slaves known to have been followers of Islam.⁸⁶ Gomez points out that one of the supply zones of the slave trade, the Senegambia region, contained a significant Muslim population and had been heavily influenced by Islam for hundreds of years by the "far reaching tentacles of the old Malian empire... of which the upper and middle Gambia composed the western most provinces before the empires dissolution before the seventeenth century," influence personified for instance in the multiple Mande speaking populations of the upper Gambia.⁸⁷ Moreover, Muslim forced immigration was not limited to the Senegambia region. While it was the only area where zones of direct Muslim domination approached the Atlantic shore in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, slaves were often captured far inland of the coastal markets from which they

⁸⁶ Gomez, "Islam in Early America," 671-710.

⁸⁷ Gomez, "Islam," 677.

embarked. Of the seven “noteworthy” Muslims whose origins Gomez traces, three came from the Senegambia region, three departed from Sierra Leone, and one’s origin was unknown.⁸⁸ Additionally, there was evidence from Africans in Jamaica that slaves came from points as far away from the coast as the Upper Niger and the Sudan, indicating that a very large area of Muslim Africa must be considered as a feeding ground for the slave trade.⁸⁹ Many of these areas experienced significant jihad movements in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹⁰ It is certain then that a minority of slaves sailing from the Gold Coast, Benin, and the Bight of Biafra, three of the most popular sources, were also Muslim.

The Mande/Mandingo/Malinke connection is by far the most revealing, however, for three reasons. First, research done using Virginia Naval district office records made available in the 1990s by the W.E.B. DuBois Slave Trade Project has found that Senegambians made up a significant proportion of slaves imported directly into Virginia whose origin were recorded; including 48, 74 and 57 percent for the naval regions of the Rappahannock, South Potomac and Lower James respectively.⁹¹ While it is ultimately impossible to know definite percentages given the large number of slaves for whom no origin was recorded, this trend indicates that a significant minority, and possible majority, of the slaves imported into Virginia came from

⁸⁸ Gomez, “Islam,” 690 – 692.

⁸⁹ See Gomez, “Islam,” 692; and Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 35-37.

⁹⁰ Timothy Insoll, “The Archeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review” in *Journal of World Prehistory*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December 1996): 487.

⁹¹ Lorena S. Walsh, “New Findings about the Virginia Slave Trade,” The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, accessed October 7, 2013, http://research.history.org/Historical_Research/Research_Themes/ThemeEnslave/SlaveTrade.cfm. As Walsh points out, the numbers for the South Potomac may be skewed by the tendency of Virginia planters to avoid high duties on imported slaves by buying on the Maryland side of the river. The percentages of slaves whose origin is recorded for the three naval districts included are 49, 45 and 53 respectively.

regions of heavy Islamic influence and with large Muslim populations. Unquestionably more so than the West Indies, where most slaves originated from the Bight of Benin and the Gold Coast, areas in which Islam was practically non-existent and from which, as noted above, a smaller minority of forced immigrants were Muslim.⁹²

Furthermore, Muslim slaves, even if a minority, had an outsized impact on slave culture in early colonial Virginia. Muslims were more likely to originate from a higher socio-economic class, and were significantly more likely to be literate, than West-Africans from non-Muslim backgrounds.⁹³ The most famous example of this was Omar Ibn Sayyid from the Carolinas, an educated Muslim (and later Christian convert) from the Senegambia region whose Bible, written in Arabic, is now in the rare book archives of Davidson College in North Carolina.⁹⁴ These characteristics gave Muslims an outsized influence in the northern part of West Africa during this period, and it is safe to assume that that they continued to have significant influence among North American slaves, especially among the first generation.

In Virginia, this influence might have been even greater than elsewhere. The slave trade moved down the African continent over the years, and Senegambia provided its greatest number of slaves in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries before being relatively abandoned in the later part of the eighteenth century. Virginia was a relatively old colony with a largely self-

⁹² Seeman, "Death in the New World," 186; and Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 24-29.

⁹³ Gomez, "Islam in Early America," 703.

⁹⁴ Omar Ibn Sayyid, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New testaments, in the Arabic Language* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Sara Hodgson, 1811). Available in the rare book room at Davidson College, North Carolina. Omar was probably unusually well-educated. He is for instance the only former slave to write an autobiography in his own language. However he was not the only educated Muslim to be brought to the American South and it is probably the unique circumstances of his individual life and the advanced level of his education that make him so noticeable.

sustaining enslaved population by the mid to late eighteenth century, unlike the West Indies, and this earlier period of major importation explains Senegambian predominance.⁹⁵ The enslaved population of Virginia jumped from five percent of the total in 1670 to twenty eight percent in 1700, precisely the period in which the Senegambia region was most exploited as a source of slave labor.⁹⁶ The same research into Virginia naval district office records referenced above indicates that the importation of slaves peaked in the period between 1731 and 1745, a trend mirrored though not neatly, by the percentage of those immigrants of Senegambian origin.⁹⁷ Furthermore, this research shows that slave merchant and planter preferences created trade patterns in which groups from specific regions predominated locally, a fact that produced homogeneous enslaved communities in which Muslims may have formed a majority.

Second, unlike most other zones of supply for the slave trade, there is a surviving narrative from this region which explicitly reveals West-African Muslim attitudes towards the corpse and its proper usage by those in power, as well as Muslim attitudes toward the use the cadaver was put to by animists. *The Epic of Sundiata* represents the defining origin myth of “eternal Mali.” A story passed down by the griots, who like the Bards and the Scandinavian Skalds specialize in the memorization and performance of the narrative histories of largely non-literate peoples, the epic centers around the person of Sundiata, a real king who founded and ruled the Malian empire in the thirteenth century. While Sundiata is less well known to western

⁹⁵ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 24 -27.

⁹⁶ Seeman, *Death*, 105.

⁹⁷ Walsh, “New Findings.”

historians than his descendant Mansa Musa, within the Mande cultural world of West Africa his epic remains the most popular story the griots tell.⁹⁸

The principle villain against whom Sundiata struggled was the evil king Soumaoro, a necromancer whose malevolent power flowed from his mistreatment of human remains. Soumaoro's connection to corpse mutilation was, in fact, the defining aspect of his personality. His capital at Sosso was "the bulwark of fetishism against the word of Allah."⁹⁹ Since becoming king of Sosso, Soumaoro had "defeated nine kings whose heads served him as fetishes in his macabre chamber. Their skins served as seats and he cut his footwear from human skin."¹⁰⁰ As a result, Soumaoro was "not like other men, for the jinn had revealed themselves to him and his power was beyond measure."¹⁰¹ His "sofas [soldiers] were very brave since they believed their king to be invincible. But Soumaoro was an evil demon and his reign had produced nothing but bloodshed. Nothing was taboo for him."¹⁰² When Sundiata's own griot was discovered within Soumaoro's inner sanctum, he mollified the necromancer by singing a song with the refrain: "All hail, you who wear clothes of human skin. I salute you, you who sit on the skin of kings."¹⁰³ This description of Soumaoro was the only part of the song repeated twice and foreshadows the later description of the Soumaoro as "the king who wore robes of human skin."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ David A. Chappell, introduction to *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, 1965, translated by D.T. Niane, Rev. ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006), vii.

⁹⁹ Niane, *Sundiata*, 41.

¹⁰⁰ Niane, *Sundiata*, 41.

¹⁰¹ Niane, *Sundiata*, 41.

¹⁰² Niane, *Sundiata*, 41.

¹⁰³ Niane, *Sundiata*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Niane, *Sundiata*, 70.

Sundiata treatment of the corpse was counterpoised to Soumaoro's. When Sundiata's mother died, and Sundiata's protector (feeling betrayed by his decision to return to Mali) refused to allow her burial, Sundiata threatened to destroy the kingdom unless he was given land to inter her.¹⁰⁵ When the king finally agreed, the burial was covered in one brief sentence: "He gave him the land and Sogolon received her funeral honours with all the regal obsequies."¹⁰⁶ Later, when a victorious Sundiata discovered the corpse of a king allied to Soumaoro, Sundiata buried him with, again, the "royal obsequies."¹⁰⁷ These terse descriptions reflect the Islamic prohibition on excessive mourning and also help to highlight the differences between legitimate and illegitimate power in Mandinka culture. Even Soumaoro's own cadaver was saved from mutilation, as the mortally wounded sorcerer disappeared into a cave at the end of the epic, in effect burying himself, an act which allowed him to be vanquished while avoiding questions of his corpse's fate.¹⁰⁸

The single use to which Sundiata put Soumaoro's fetishes further underscored the difference between the two men. Instead of using their power, as Sundiata was willing to do with non-corpse related magic, Sundiata used the fetishes as a replacement for Soumaoro's missing body. "At last, right at the back," the griot tells us of Sundiata's victory parade, "came Sosso Balla, who had been placed in the midst of his father's fetishes. The fetishes had been loaded onto donkeys. The crowd gave loud cries of horror on seeing the inmates of Soumaoro's

¹⁰⁵ Niane, *Sundiata*, 46 – 47.

¹⁰⁶ Niane, *Sundiata*, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Niane, *Sundiata*, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Niane, *Sundiata*, 67.

grisly chamber.”¹⁰⁹ The sorcerer king and his fetishes of human skin and bone were conceptually inseparable and interchangeable. Soumaoro’s evil was defined through his abuse of remains, just as Sundiata’s virtue was largely defined by his adherence to Islamic customs of respect for the corpse and emotional restraint.

Among the Muslims who arrived in Virginia then, corpses were loci of extraordinary power. The exploitation of that power, however, was inherently illegitimate, and undercut the authority it granted. Throughout the British Colonial South and West Indian colonies, Euro-Americans utilized West-African fear of mutilation and corpse dismemberment to enforce mastery over the enslaved population. This could take place before or after the offending slave was dead. Slaves seen as threats to the social order could be killed through a process, often public, of slow and progressive mangling. As Douglas R. Egerton observed, “in extreme cases, or in times of servile unrest, white authorities resorted to torture and dismemberment while the accused remained alive.”¹¹⁰ Both strategies functioned based on the idea, which Egerton and others have argued was widely shared by whites in the American South and West Indies that “Africans, and many African Americans, believed that an unnatural death, or the failure to observe proper burial rites, doomed the soul to wander forever in the desolate waste land of the damned.”¹¹¹ The utility of these practices was so apparent that the mutilation of the enslaved dead became routine in Anglo-American slave holding societies. In Jamaica for instance, Anglican rector John Venn wrote in 1751 that “to deprive [enslaved Africans] of their funeral

¹⁰⁹ Niane, *Sundiata*, 76.

¹¹⁰ Douglas R. Egerton, “A Peculiar Mark of Infamy: Dismemberment, Burial, and Rebelliousness in Slave Societies” in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, eds. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 149.

¹¹¹ Egerton, “A Peculiar Mark of Infamy,” 149.

Rites by burning their dead Bodies, seems to Negroes a greater Punishment than Death itself,” a statement that reveals both the commonality of this strategy and African responses to it.¹¹² The greater Muslim presence in Virginia increased the horror and revulsion felt by slave witnesses, as burning and public display of the corpse violated strict Muslim taboos which forbade cremation and demanded the speedy (often within hours) burial of the deceased.

This evidence suggests that while whites used corpse mutilation to reinforce an asymmetrical balance of power, they failed to fully comprehend the implications. While the Virginia court which in 1730 sentenced the body of a slave convicted of the murder of a white woman to be dismembered and the resulting pieces publicly displayed at points around the county may have seen the courts actions as legitimate, and legitimizing, expressions of their authority and the subservient status of the enslaved, there was a significant and influential portion of the enslaved who saw this same action as delegitimizing white rule.¹¹³ White Virginians understood their actions within the framework of European justice, where corpse mutilation was an accepted expression of state power. Muslim Africans, on the other hand, most likely understood the same process as revealing the white judicial system, and the planter class in general, as nothing but a collection of necromancers.

It is revealing, and indicative of the primary challenge to reconstructing enslaved deathways, that this description of African sentiments survived at all. Almost every surviving record of slave funerals or African treatment of the corpse in the British New World came out of the West Indies. White, educated, Virginians only noted African burials in the early nineteenth

¹¹² John Veen to Bishop Sherlock, 15 June 1751, Fulham Papers, Vol. 8, 1740- undated, f.47, Lambeth Palace Library, London; quoted in Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 134.

¹¹³ Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 196.

century, after the end of the legal international slave trade in 1807 and long after evangelical preachers had begun the process of Christianizing African-American slaves during the first Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century. The sources that have survived came, not from the Virginians themselves but outsiders such as Philip Vickers Fithian. A northerner brought south to work as a tutor in the Carter household between 1773 and 1774, Fithian's one description of a slave burial was brief and cryptic:

I read Prays [sic], by the desire of the Parents, at the Grave over the deceased Child *Prischilla, Nanccy, Fanny, Betsy, Ben, Bob, Harry, & Myself*, & about forty of fifty Negroes were present. Neither the Father nor the Mother of the Child went out; imitating the example they see in others, & stay from an affectation of overflowing Grief.¹¹⁴

The “deceased Child” was almost certainly the “Negro Child about six years old” whose death Fithian reported two days previously.¹¹⁵ At the time of the child's death he simply commented that the African-American population of the plantation was “much alarmed.” In the above quote he attributed the fact that “neither the Father nor the Mother...went out,” (it is unclear what he meant here) to “affectation” and the imitation of “the example they see in others.” Fithian, who had not been raised in the South around large numbers of African-Americans, was not the ideal witness, and it is hard to discern much from his account. Were the parents “imitating” the mourning rituals of other blacks or whites? That the burial of a child was a communal event can be seen by the number of “negro” attendees, but burials were communal events for everyone in colonial Virginia and this says nothing significant. It was meaningful, however, that this was all that Fithian wrote about the reaction of the enslaved to the death of a child. There was no talk of

¹¹⁴ Philip Vickers Fithian, *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion 1773-1774*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville: Dominion Books, a division of The University Press of Virginia, 1968), 184.

¹¹⁵ Fithian, *The Journal and Letters*, 182.

spiritual inquest or “heathen” music, though, by the 1770s, such expressions were unusual, if they had ever been popular in Virginia in the first place.

Traditionally this absence of comment has been attributed to disinterest on the part of the planting class or the loss of sources over time. However, surely the same forces were at work in the West Indies. Even if it were accepted that the British population in the West Indies needed to better understand their slaves in order to retain an asymmetrical power relationship while submerged underneath a one to ten demographic gap. Or that monstrously high death rates limited creolization and preserved noteworthy African forms. Or even that much of the comment arose out of the British abolition movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the pool of sources remains peculiarly unbalanced. Virginia also suffered from gruesomely high death rates until at least the mid-eighteenth century. Virginia’s planters also had to find ways of using African concepts in order to undermine African agency. Issues which modern scholarship have identified are insufficient to explain the lack of sources from Virginia or the rest of the American South. The only surviving references to slave funerals that are available from early colonial Virginia were the laws passed by the House of Burgesses in 1680 and Westmoreland County in 1687 that sought to control or ban slave funerals, and were preoccupied with the possibility of the funeral as a source of unrest and give little to no description of the funeral themselves.¹¹⁶

If a significant and influential portion of the Virginian slave population were of either an Islamic or syncretic animist/Islamic background, however, a better answer for the muteness of early Virginian whites becomes possible. It is probable that slave burials in the seventeenth and

¹¹⁶ June Purcell Guild, ed., *Black Laws of Virginia: A Summary of the Legislative Acts of Virginia Concerning Negroes from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, 1969), 45 -46; and quoted in Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 105.

early eighteenth centuries occasioned less interest in Virginia because they were often not very unlike the burials of Christians. Muslim traditions of burial, such as the washing and shrouding of the corpse and the orientation of the remains facing towards the East (towards Mecca instead of Jerusalem), were practically indistinguishable from the burial traditions of western Christians. To an outside and largely ignorant observer, Islam influenced burial might have appeared as merely a more modest form of Christian burial, of what was considered “normal” and un-noteworthy to a euro-centric white Virginian. In contrast, burial rituals of enslaved people from regions of Africa with only slight or no Islamic influence were known for “spiritual inquests,” loud music and other “heathen” religious expressions which disturbed the sensibilities of white planters and occasioned remark. Since many animist African traditions also buried along an east-west axis and shrouded their dead, and both practices appear to have been near universal among the enslaved, it is logical to assume that it was these “heathen” expressions that led West-Indian planters to remark on slave death-ways. That there was an absence of comment from Virginia’s planters indicates a distinctively lower occurrence of remarkable ritual.¹¹⁷

There were, however, three noticeable differences between traditional Islamic graves and those identified in some enslaved Virginian burials. First was the use of coffins, forbidden in Islam but popular among American slaves. As discussed above however, coffin use for non-elites was either a largely American innovation or a practice first given full rein by the wide availability of wood in the New World. Furthermore, as Seeman points out, “even though slaves had a great deal of autonomy in burying their dead, masters were customarily responsible for providing the coffins for their slaves.”¹¹⁸ The containment of remains within a coffin had

¹¹⁷ Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 194 and 207.

¹¹⁸ Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 213.

become so imbedded within the Anglo-American concept of decent burial that coffins were often required by slave owners. Either way, widespread adoption of the coffin among the African population was no more mysterious than the similar adoption among the white population.

Second, African-American graves throughout the South show evidence of grave ornamentation with rocks, shells, pieces of pottery, mason jars, wine bottles and other materials.¹¹⁹ However, there were no reports of this practice before the 1840s, well after the end of the legal slave trade at a time when creolization had submerged any traces of Islamic practice within a more general animist influenced African-American Christianity.¹²⁰ Evidence that African folkways concerning the body (and therefore assumedly the corpse) were malleable can easily be seen in the universal disappearance of filed teeth and ritual scarification “country marks” among second generation African-Americans.¹²¹

Third, some slaves were buried with fetishes, charms and other more mundane grave goods, a decidedly non-Islamic practice. Strictly Islamic graves were a minority, or occasionally a small majority, even in the areas that saw the most immigration from Senegambia. Examples of grave ornamentation, as well as the inclusion of grave goods in some African-American graves, could simply represent followers of the more numerically dominant animist traditions or a syncretic blending of practices among creole slaves. Since these two practices were themselves

¹¹⁹ Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 219-221.

¹²⁰ Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 204.

¹²¹ B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Kingston: the University of the West Indies Press, 1995), 128. See also Jerome S. Handler, “Determining African Birth by Skeletal Remains: A Note on Tooth Mutilation,” *Historical Archeology*, Vol. 28, No.3 (1994), pp. 113 -119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616321>.

somewhat rare, the fact remains that there were far fewer slave burials that were definitively not Muslim, than those which very well might have been.

Animist slaves, a majority in most parts of seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Virginia, followed a sort of nonspecific animist faith constructed through commonalities that existed among West African non-Muslim traditions. Surviving sources on animist traditions are problematic. As with accounts of most slave burials, all of the sources came from the West Indies or West Africa, different cultural environments with different histories than Virginia. Moreover, many of the sources available from West Africa date from well after the end of the slave trade. African practice was no more static in Africa than in it was in America, especially as Christian missionary activity picked up in the nineteenth century. Almost all of these sources moreover were written by whites, adding a further layer of mediation.

The elements of traditional religions which were most broadly accepted as useful by the enslaved, and which they drew on in order to create African-American culture were generally the same or similar throughout the New World. It is reasonable therefore to expect that accounts from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Caribbean and West Africa were at least broadly indicative of what animist Africans created in other British American slave societies. It is possible then to make several generalizations about traditional non-Islamic West-African religious beliefs in Virginia.

First, to West Africans, much like with early modern Englishmen, the line between the departed and the living was thin. As a missionary with experience in the Dutch West Indies wrote in 1770, “their treatment of the deceased reveals the fact that they consider their condition to be little different from that of the living, attributing to the former the very same needs whose

fulfillment was necessary for them when alive.”¹²² The boundary between the living and the dead, which to outsiders appeared ill-defined to the point of non-existence, was bridged in West-African culture in ways that were explicitly corporeal. Many West-African cultures engaged in “sub-floor” burial, a practice in which the remains of the deceased were interred beneath the floor of their descendants’ home, obliterating the distinction between the living and the deceased members of the family. While its existence in Virginia has yet to be revealed, this practice exposes how conceptually similar the bodies of the living and the dead often were in West-African culture. One West-African explained that the son of the deceased “has his bed very close to his father, who lies buried there; and when he eats or drinks something, he gives his father the first mouthful,” in order to ensure that the father’s spirit will not harm the living generations.¹²³

Second, as a result of this closeness between the living and the dead, West-African animist spirituality stressed the need for proper burial and respect for the corpse as much as, if not more than, Christianity and Islam. The motivations behind this respect, however, were profoundly different. Instead of preparing the body for resurrection at the end of this world, animist belief stressed the role of proper burial in facilitating the transport of the soul into the next. “Offenses that had been committed against the deceased,” Brown writes, “had to be atoned for before the spirit could leave the community. The threat of spectral revenge was supposed to be the severest moral sanction” against those who had wronged the deceased.¹²⁴ This reflects an important and overlooked point. To animist Africans improper burial maintained a

¹²² Quoted in Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 66.

¹²³ Quoted in Seeman, *Death in the New World*, 21.

¹²⁴ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 69.

spirit/body/community unity in which the spirit's connection to the living world was unnaturally prolonged and problematized. As a result, dismemberment, mutilation, and bad burial subjected the spirit to the same humiliation that was heaped upon the remains. Beyond the emotional pain this caused the community of the deceased, beyond even the implications for the fate of the individual's soul, this opened the community up to harm caused by the infuriated spirit, adding an additional level of terror to corpse display. Without a body to bury, this threat could not be adequately addressed, and the menace of the deceased spirit remained with the community forever, with the exposed and rotting corpse of the deceased a daily reminder of this terror. White use of the corpse as a way motivating acceptance of slavery among animist communities engendered more distress than they were aware.

This closeness between the living and the dead through the corpse was further underscored by the practice of what has been termed the "spiritual inquest," a belief that the remains of the dead could be interrogated. A recurring expression of this ritual, observed in slightly different forms in the West Indies and West Africa, was described by Charles Leslie. "[T]hey who bear [the body] on their Shoulders," he wrote in 1739, "make a Feint of stopping at every door they pass, and pretend, that if the deceast [sic] Person had received any Injury, the Corps [sic] moves toward the House, and that they can't avoid letting it fall to the Ground when before the Door."¹²⁵ This practice, in which the remains appeared to have the same power of locomotion and accusation as the departed had while alive, was the most disturbing aspect of slave funerals to outsiders and was repeatedly mentioned, always with dismissive language, in

¹²⁵ Charles Leslie of Jamaica. *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica. Wherein the Antient and present State of the Colony, its Importance to Great Britain, laws, trade, manners and religion, together with the most Remarkable and curious animals, plants, trees, &c. are described: with a particular account of the sacrifices, libations, &c. At this day in use among the Negroes.* (Edinburgh, MDCCXXXIX: 1739)[Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#). Gale. Virginia Commonwealth University. 10 Oct. 2013.

white accounts of the West Indies.¹²⁶ While white fascination with such an unusual practice has possibly left a distorted view of its importance, the fact remains that, as Brown put it, the sources showed that the ritual “remained formally consistent over an extended period of time.”¹²⁷ If this funeral procession as an expression of the spiritual inquest was a part of slave funerals in Virginia no record of it that has survived. Even if it was, the inquest was significantly more popular in the West Indies, as the change over time in importance of supply zones for the slave trade, mixed with the high death rates of the West Indies, meant that animist traditions, not Islamic, were reinforced. However, the multiple mentions of the practice, along with its existence in both the New World and Africa, indicated that the enslaved found it important, and it would be meaningful if it had no influence among Virginia’s enslaved. Its absence would further accentuate the sway of Islam among enslaved Africans in early Virginia.

Whether their beliefs were Islamic or animist, or a combination of both, the process of enslavement challenged African cultural traditions about the care of the corpse in ways that connected enslavement to the destruction of the body. As Brown points out, up to one out of every three slaves taken in the interior died before being shipped to the New World and “near the big markets and along the roads that connected them, slaves who died of exhaustion, disease, or suicide were thrown unceremoniously into what locals called the Ajo Ofia, the ‘bad bush,’” while slaves who died in the days before shipment were “commonly thrown to the sharks.”¹²⁸ The horrors did not stop at the shore line. In his eighteenth-century slave narrative, Olaudah Equiano wrote that, even after he had been assured by other Africans that he was being taken to

¹²⁶ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 74.

¹²⁷ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 75.

¹²⁸ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 34.

“these white peoples country to work for them,” instead of being immediately eaten by the Europeans who manned the slave ship as he originally dreaded, he remained afraid that “I should be put to death, the white men looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty.”¹²⁹ This cruelty was tied closely to the handling of the corpse, a fact Equiano emphasized by pointing out that after a European sailor was flogged to death the crew “tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in the same manner.”¹³⁰ Death by flogging was a horrifically disfiguring way to kill a human being. Even those who survived a severe beating often carried scars for life, and Equiano’s focus on this act may further indicated his fear of bodily destruction.

The enslaved experiences with damaged and destroyed corpses did not end with the Middle Passage. Instead, it was a central support of the entire slave system throughout British America. One contemporary accounted that African’s “believe that if they are killed and not dismembered, they shall return again to their own country.”¹³¹ Dismemberment ended all chance of release from suffering through death. The courts, and the white slave-owning elite that ran them, quickly discovered this belief and found that corpse mutilation was extremely effective in forcing compliance.

¹²⁹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself*. Sixth ed., enlarged. (London, 1793). [Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#). Gale. Virginia Commonwealth University. 9 May, 2013. 49.

¹³⁰ Equiano, *The interesting narrative*, 49.

¹³¹ Quoted in Egerton, “A Peculiar Mark,” 153.

There was evidence that in Virginia the ease with which whites disfigured black bodies lead to a corresponding shift in how they viewed white bodies. Egerton argues that “whereas English magistrates meted out sentences of dismemberment to the white working class,” he found no evidence of the judicial dismemberment of white corpses in Virginia. Virginia courts were not adverse to dismemberment. Egerton found at least twenty-six cases of Virginia courts ordering the public display of the heads of executed slaves.¹³² Instead, judicial dismemberment became a fate reserved for Africans. A search of issues of the *Virginia Gazette*, a paper published by several different editors starting in 1736, supports this assertion. While editors published several mentions of slaves executed in ways which left their bodies mutilated or destroyed, such as the enslaved woman burned alive for the murder of her owner in 1737, the paper reports no judicial corpse dismemberment of American whites.¹³³ Punishing the corpse for the transgressions the individual committed while alive was reserved, by the mid-eighteenth century at least, for the enslaved, foreigners, and Catholics.¹³⁴

This was especially telling given that the paper had no shyness when it came to reporting the dismemberment, disinterment or mutilation of whites in other instances. A good example of this can be seen earlier in the same year when a single issue of the paper included both the story of a ferret eating the eyes of a child and a dog digging up corpses interred in a churchyard and eating them.¹³⁵ Importantly, these examples came primarily from foreign sources or when

¹³² Egerton, “A Peculiar Mark,” 154.

¹³³ *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, February 18, 1737. No. 30. Pg. 4. All years modernized to the current date system.

¹³⁴ For examples of judicial corpse mutilation and disinterment by Catholic authorities see *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, May 6, 1737. No. 41. Pg. 2. Col.2. and February 4, 1737. No. 28, Pg. 3, Col. 1.

¹³⁵ *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, December 31, 1737. No 23. Pg. 1-2.

Virginian sources were included, focused on accidents or murders that could be expressly condemned by the author as barbaric or unnatural.

There were two examples of judicial corpse punishment of whites from the period before 1736: the attempted disinterment of Nathaniel Bacon and the public display of the severed head of Edward Teach (better known as Blackbeard) after his death in 1718.¹³⁶ These two exceptions, however, highlight why white dismemberment became taboo. Both Teach, Bacon and their interracial followers threatened the fabric of Virginia society. Bacon's rebellion was serious enough that he captured and burned Jamestown in 1676, while Teach was the most famous of the pirates who threatened to sever the tenuous maritime connection between the colony and England. The fact that the colonial state only punished the corpses of white men in these two instances suggests the severity of the threat each had posed triggered the unusual retributions acted out on their bodies.¹³⁷ Both men had in effect placed themselves outside, and against, the white power structure. As threats to the illusion of permanency the exhibited corpse of either strengthened the argument for stability of white power, not undermined it. It should be remembered however, that Bacon's corpse was never found, and so we have only one actual example of the judicial corpse display of whites.

By the second half of the eighteenth century slave owners became remarkably open about their comfort with the dismemberment and mutilation of the enslaved. By 1767, advertisements for runaway slaves in the *Gazette* began offering money not just for the return of a slave, but for

¹³⁶ Beverley, *History and Present State of Virginia*, 84 and Arthur L. Cooke, "British Newspaper Accounts of Blackbeard's Death," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Jul., 1953), pp. 304-306.

¹³⁷ It is also quite possible that Teach's beheading was a result of the need to bring back proof that he was dead, with the later display of his head incidental. The story that his skull was made into a punch bowl is hard to track down and, if true, relay a singular event which strengthens this essay's overall argument by its uniqueness.

the return of his detached head.¹³⁸ The judicial punishment of the enslaved was so common that in one case in the 1770s slaves who had been accused of murder, even when “all Evidence against the Negroes was so weak and dark,” that no one believed it, were still whipped before being released.¹³⁹ Unfortunately the source gives no indication of how severely the slaves were beaten, important as whipping could often lead to gruesome and disfiguring death. Slaves mutilated or dismemberment for attempted rebellion in other colonies were considered important news throughout the *Gazette*'s existence. In 1737, the *Gazette* reported the aftermath of a slave conspiracy in Antigua where several slaves were broken on the wheel and “after, their Heads were cut off, and stuck up on a Pole of some considerable height. Four more of the heads of these honest Gentlemen were burnt the same day.”¹⁴⁰ Over thirty years later a different publisher included the story of the fate of slave rebels in Jamaica, where “some of them are hanged, some burnt, and others beheaded after first being strangled. Their heads are fixed on Poles along the high roads, as a Warning to the rest.”¹⁴¹ While the white body had become too sacred to be dismembered, the dismemberment of black bodies became routine, called for in the public sphere without fear of sanction.

The difference between the recording of slave death-ways in Virginia and the West Indies also arose from the same source as the differences in the death-ways of Anglo-Americans in those colonies: the fundamentally dissimilar way in which the colonists and the British back

¹³⁸ See for instance, *The Virginia Gazette*, Purdie and Dixon, April 16, 1767. Pg. 3, Col. 2., and Rind, January, 10, 1771. Pg. 4, Col. 1.

¹³⁹ Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 192.

¹⁴⁰ *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, April 1, 1737. Pg. 3, Col. 2.

¹⁴¹ *The Virginia Gazette*, Purdie and Dixon, April 11, 1771. Pg. 2, Col. 1.

home conceived of the different colonies. Jamaica was a place to go so that a planter could return home to England rich; it was rarely a home itself. As the Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards, whose own residence in Jamaica was transitory at best, remarked, “even such of them as have resided in the West Indies from their birth, look on the islands as their temporary abode only, and the fond notion of being able to go home (as they emphatically term a visit to England) year after year animates their industry and alleviates their misfortune.”¹⁴²

Virginia, by far the largest and most economically and socially important colony in the American South during the early colonial period, was a home for Englishmen. Though there were exceptions, Virginia was generally not a place Englishmen only visited for short periods out of necessity. Nor was it a place where they owned property they never saw, as was often the case with the chronically absentee landowning class of Jamaica. Instead, Virginia was a place that Englishmen immigrated to permanently. It was a place where their children were born, where they married and where, in the end, they died and were buried. While many of Jamaica’s elite made provision to have their bodies returned to England for burial, each generation of Virginians nailed down their claim to the land with their own remains, attaching themselves to Virginia until Judgment Day.¹⁴³

When William Byrd II famously expressed the fear that his community was rapidly becoming a “New Guinea” he expressed a sentiment that a European in the West Indies (and the death rate in the West Indies ensured it was usually a first generation European) could not have fully understood, much less sympathized with. The white population of Jamaica comprised only

¹⁴² Quoted in Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 17.

¹⁴³ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 89-90.

seven percent of the total inhabitants in 1778.¹⁴⁴ The American South was the only place in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century world where an enslaved African population lived amidst a relatively settled, free, English majority. The English never truly owned Jamaica. For much of the colonial period the center of the island was controlled by Maroon bands so powerful the British were forced to sign a treaty with them in 1739 before the island became stable enough for sustained economic expansion.¹⁴⁵ The British colonial presence in the Caribbean was also comparatively new, with the first small English settlements not made until twenty years after the founding of Jamestown, and Jamaica not seized until a generation later in 1655.¹⁴⁶ Even where white skin ruled that rule was always a delicate balancing act. What sets Virginia (and to a lesser extent Maryland and North Carolina) apart from any other British colony with a plantation economy was that the Europeans came to stay in numbers, brought women, and produced a self-sustaining white majority relatively quickly.

For this reason, the elite white populations of Virginia and the West Indies had different motivators and appealed to different societies when they strove to project an aura of stability, and they did so in ways that were often different in subtle but deeply meaningful ways. By comparing the two, the forces behind the differences become clearer. The way the colonial elite of both regions used their corpses to project the permanence of the existing order developed within the intertwined relationships of plantation society. They had to express an unwavering hierarchy not just to each other and to non-elite whites but to the enslaved Africans whose deathways they had exploited to help create the wealth and status displayed in their marble tombs and

¹⁴⁴ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 15.

¹⁴⁵ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 14.

granite sarcophagi. As they did so, they drew on much of the imagery they had used in life. While it is accepted that the experience of slavery changed the death-ways of African-Americans, the very real impact it had on the death-ways of Virginia's white elite has been overlooked. White death-ways were no more immune from forces of cultural exchange than African death-ways, and while they possessed the means to hide it better, this process can still be discerned. In Virginia, the need was even greater than in the West Indies as the colony's image had been acutely tarnished by the disastrous early-seventeenth-century interactions with Native-Americans. While this fact set the stage for later Anglo-Virginian rituals surrounding the corpse, a fact that should not be forgotten, it was with the complex and alien beliefs of enslaved Africans that white planters had foremost to contend.

Chapter Three: Death and Stability in Colonial Virginia

Many commentators, both in the colonial era and since, have remarked on the affinity of colonial Virginians for home burial. In most instances, historians have accepted the explanation given by the colonist themselves that this uncommon tradition resulted from the distance between the far flung plantations and small farms that dotted the Virginia landscape. Recently, Laura Winner has argued that home burial represented something more profound, an atomization of piety among the Virginia gentry. The chronic lack of clergy before the mid-eighteenth century, she argues, led Virginia's elite to replace the empty churches with their own homes as the center of their spiritual worlds. Neither of these explanations fully explains the phenomena, nor has anyone as of yet understood the magnitude of the change home burial represented. By burying in their own property instead of the sanctified ground of the churchyard, Virginians broke a taboo with roots reaching far back into the beginning of the Christian age, a taboo which

in England had survived even the Reformation intact.¹⁴⁷ While home burial would arise in other British American colonies, it would never have the force it did in Virginia, and perhaps never would have been taken up at all without Virginia's example. The reasons for this break lie not in the distance between plantations and church sanctioned graveyards but in Virginia's elite compulsive need to display power, mastery, permanence, and stability through the corpse and its trappings.

The differences in tone between Virginia and other colonies can be seen by comparing two of the few surviving sources from the American South, which directly reference the motivations behind private burial. Writing in the early eighteenth century Hugh Jones, an English minister who held posts in several Virginia churches, described home burial thus:

The parishes being of great extent (some sixty miles long and upwards) many dead corpses cannot be conveyed to the church to be buried: so that it is customary to bury in gardens or orchards, where whole families lye interred together, in a spot generally handsomely enclosed, planted with evergreens, and the graves kept decently: Hence likewise arises the occasion of preaching funeral sermons in houses, where at funerals are assembled a great congregation of neighbors and friends; and if you insist upon having the sermon and ceremony at church, *they'll say they will be without it*, unless performed after their usual custom.¹⁴⁸ [Emphasis added]

While Jones mentioned distance as the determining factor, the presence of "a great congregation of neighbors and friends" reinforces Rhys Issacs' observation that early Virginians never let distance stop them from traveling. Distance as the determining factor in home burial further rings hollow given that, as plantation owners, Virginia's elites depended for their survival on their ability to move large quantities of cash crops extended distances. In contrast this account

¹⁴⁷ Houlbrooke, "Introduction," 22. While the justifications for churchyard burial changed among the more radical English reformers, burial in sacred ground remained an almost universal custom. See Houlbrook, "Death, Church, and Family," 38.

¹⁴⁸ Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia: From Whence Is Inferred A Short View of Maryland and North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 97. Emphasis mine.

from North Carolina noted that in that colony home burial was an exception, “Funerals take place in the following manner: If the church is too far removed the dead are buried at their home, occasionally also at the home of a good neighbor where then gradually a sort of a churchyard is formed. *If, however, as is usually the case, they are brought to the church, (to a regular cemetery).*”¹⁴⁹ Moreover, those at the top of colonial societies possessed the means to be buried in the churchyard if they desired it. In Jamaica, planter Thomas Thistlewood noted in his diary a corpse which was not only carried miles from the deceased’s plantation into town, but then shipped back across the ocean to England.¹⁵⁰

The obstinacy of the Virginia elite when it came to home burial can also be seen, surprisingly, in some of the churchyards of early Virginia. Occasionally, extremely wealthy families would take over the graveyards of nearby churches they had paid to build or, perhaps had been abandoned, turning them into essentially private burial grounds, and in essence expanding the home plantation to include the church.¹⁵¹ For instance, when the site of the Westover church was moved in 1730, the Byrds and the Harrisons continued to be buried in the old churchyard.¹⁵² When William Byrd II died in 1744, he was buried not in the churchyard with his family, but alone on his estate. Even when abandoned graveyards had been imaginatively absorbed into the plantation then, the drive to bury at home remained strong enough that in a few occasions, Virginia’s elite chose to forgo familial ties for those of property. Unfortunately, the surviving eighteenth-century tombstones seen today give a distorted view of the popularity of

¹⁴⁹ Report of Rev. Mr. Roschen, 1789, quoted in *Society in Early North Carolina: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan D. Watson (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 2000), 175. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁰ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 88-91.

¹⁵¹ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 147.

¹⁵² Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 148.

church burial, because many plantation tombstones and even vaults were moved to churchyards during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to discourage vandalism.¹⁵³

If distance was not the decisive factor in the development of private burial, other issues must have been involved. Many historians have argued that planters clung to home burial because of its ability to mark status. As Winner contends, “Household burial was a marker of status because household burial made clear that the decedent was a property holder... furthermore, household burial precluded the tacit social leveling suggested by burial in the churchyard.”¹⁵⁴ Winner was not the only historian to make this argument, and status, like distance, was certainly a factor. However, in order to back up this assertion Winner, like most other historians who argue for this understanding, relied heavily on one source in particular: a quote from the *Journal of Philip Vickers Fithian*, in which he wrote that “I understand only the lower sort of People are buried at the Church; for the Gentleman have private burying-Yards.”¹⁵⁵

In her discussion of home burial, Winner included a single throwaway line worthy of further exploration. She stated that home burial allowed “survivors to look after the cemetery and ensure that animals did not root up and feed on the graves of the dead or break down the gravestone.”¹⁵⁶ It was somewhat surprising then that when she, like others before her, used the Fithian quote mentioned above she left out its context. While Fithian was speaking indirectly to

¹⁵³ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 147.

¹⁵⁴ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 150.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773 – 1774* ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville: Dominion Books, 1957), 41.

¹⁵⁶ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 149.

issues of status, his primary concern was the issue of animals disturbing graves. The complete exchange makes this clear:

At the Church to day I heard an impious Expression from a young Scotch-Man, Tutor in Mr Washington's family; he meant it for a Satire upon the neglect of the people in suffering their Grave Yard to lie common – He saw some Cattle and Hogs feeding and rooting in the yard; “Why, says he, if I was buried here it would grieve me to look up and see *Swine* Feeding over me”! – But I understand only the lower sort of People are buried at the Church; for the Gentleman have private burying-Yards.¹⁵⁷

As Fithian's full comments show, the important difference between public and private burial was the ability to safeguard the dead from desecration. This was what separated elite and non-elite burial. Consumption of corpses and inadequately buried (or unburied) bodies, in short the inability to ensure the “decent burial” so important to English and Anglo-Americans alike, had been the central embarrassment of Virginia's beginning. It was the symbol of everything wrong with the colony's initial years. Distance played a part, as did a connection to the land and prestige, but the scant evidence available indicates that the primary deterrent to churchyard burial among those that could afford to avoid it was the fact that the church, with its far flung chapels of ease and its absent ministers, was incapable of performing the one duty Virginia's gentry demanded above all else: a peaceful, undisturbed resting place for the deceased.

This fact was further highlighted when Fithian returned again to the question of ideal burial. Fithian related a later conversation with the Carters, his employers, which began when “Mr. Carter observed that he much dislikes the common method of making Burying Yards round Churches, and having them open to every beast,” instead Carter thought they should be “at some small distance from the church, nearly and strongly enclosed, and the Graves kept up decent, &

¹⁵⁷ Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 41.

plain.”¹⁵⁸ Personally, Carter desired even more. As Fithian recorded, Carter wished that he “would have no splendid, nor magnificent Monument, nor even Stone to say ‘Hic jacet [Here lies].’”¹⁵⁹ What Carter did desire, moreover, further underscores his tendency to focus on the physical aspect of death, the fate of his corpse, while rejecting commemoration, “He told us he proposes to make his own Coffin & use it for a chest till its proper use shall be required – That no Stone, nor Inscription to be put over him – And that he would choose to be laid under a shady Tree where he might be undisturbed, & sleep in peace and obscurity.”¹⁶⁰

On the surface, this quote may seem to support one argument made by this thesis, that Virginia’s elite held an almost neurotic fear of corpse desecration, while weakening another, that they responded to this fear by fashioning their grave sites into monuments to stability. However, the passage reveals more than any other the importance of monumental commemoration to Virginia’s elite. The fact that Carter twice repeated his desire that no monument, no matter how simple, be erected over his grave site, and the fact that Fithian found this desire so central to the conversation that he recorded it twice in four lines exemplifies how unusual this desire was and how much it stood out. Furthermore, Fithian made a point to record Mrs. Carter’s reaction to her husband’s uncommon aspirations. “Mrs Carter beg’d,” he wrote, “that She might have a Stone, with this only for a Monument, ‘Here lies *Ann Tasker Carter*.’”¹⁶¹ Both Carters explicitly linked their burials with the future state of their individual selves, more evidence that eighteenth-century people thought of the self as a psychosomatic of body and spirit. Carter planned to sleep

¹⁵⁸ Fithian, *Journals and Letters*, 61.

¹⁵⁹ Fithian, *Journals and Letters*, 61.

¹⁶⁰ Fithian, *Journals and Letters*, 61.

¹⁶¹ Fithian, *Journals and Letters*, 61. Emphasis in the original.

“undisturbed” beneath his tree, and Ann Carter’s preferred marker would do nothing but advertise that *she* lay beneath it. Both also centered their concepts of decent burial on commemorative monuments, either through conscious rejection, or by an eighteenth-century wife’s willingness to contradict her husband because of her desire for one. Carter’s own unusual form of *momento mori*, the prefabrication and daily use of his own coffin, further highlights that attitudes toward death for elite Virginians often focused on the main implement for the preservation of physical remains.

The importance of the location of graves was more complex than the term “home burial” might suggest. Burials could be used for more than claiming land by a single family. By burying on the land of relatives or neighbors, Virginians strengthened extended social ties that were often new and, when compared to the extended system of support many of the more elite immigrants had left behind in Britain, unstable. Sharing the resting places of loved ones “helped elite Virginians maintain and intensify family identities, and to perpetuate those identities through time.”¹⁶² Robert Rose, a clergyman from a high status Scottish family who immigrated to the colony in 1724, chose to bury his first wife and two of their children, not in the churchyard of one of the several parishes he serviced, or one of his own plantations, or his home at Bear Garden, but at Brooke’s Bank, a plantation owned by his wife’s mother’s family.¹⁶³

This choice fulfilled both practical and emotional needs for Rose. Rose’s constant traveling severely limited his ability to maintain the graves of his wife and children, while their burial at Brooke’s Bank strengthened his ties to an important family just as those ties were

¹⁶² Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 143.

¹⁶³ Robert Rose, *The Diary of Robert Rose: A View of Virginia by a Scottish Parson, 1746 – 1751*, ed. Ralph Emmett Fall (Verona: McClure Printing Company, 1977), 44.

weakened by death. Rose was not unfeeling about his daughter's death or her burial alongside her mother and brother. When his daughter died, Rose slipped out of the normally emotionally reserved nature of his diary, adding two lines at the end of the entry which, after remembering the required submission to God's judgment, he crossed out. Two days later, on November twelfth of 1748, he "buried my Dear Daughter's Body by her Mother & Brother Robert's at Mrs. Brooke's plantation," and spent the rest of the day with his in-laws.¹⁶⁴ By burying his wife, daughter, and son at Brooke's Bank he provided both a suitable burial place for his family and solidified his connections with the Brookes' through shared investment in the physical remains of the individuals who had in life tied them together.

The burial patterns of Robert Rose and his descendants illustrate the change of a family's death-ways and show the complexity of private burial often overlooked by recent attempts to explain its existence. Rose, a European immigrant and clergyman, never buried any of his deceased dependents in the churchyard or Glebe (parish land set aside for the use of the priest) of any of the six separate churches he serviced, despite the fact that, for most of Rose's time in Virginia, between 1725 and 1748, his family lived on the glebe of St. Anne's Parish in Albemarle County, only moving to Bear Garden three years before Rose's own death in 1751.¹⁶⁵ Rose himself was buried at St. John's Church in Richmond. Rose's descendants, however, did bury at Belleville, a later plantation on the site of Bear Garden.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Rose, *The Diary*, 44.

¹⁶⁵ Ralph Emmett Fall, introduction to Rose, *The Diary*, xv.

¹⁶⁶ Fall, "Introduction," xvi.

The Rose family then was a family in transition. The fact that Rose did not bury any family members at the St. Anne's glebe where he lived for twenty-three years suggests either an aversion to burial on sacred land (doubtful given his own resting place), or an attraction to private burial, stronger than previously considered. Winner's argument that private burial arose from an environment where "in the absence of a strong clergy, laity, especially elite laity, took charge of church life," a process which turned the home, as opposed to the churchyard, into sacred ground, does not sufficiently explain why a parson living on church land, and then his own plantation, would choose to bury his family at the plantation of his deceased wife's mother's family.¹⁶⁷ Instead, St. Anne's glebe and Bear Garden lacked something that Brooke's Bank provided and which later Belleville would possess for Rose's children. This missing aspect was security, both concrete and imaginative. Rose was gone too often and the churches were too often vacant, a fact repeatedly attested to in Rose's diary, and Bear Garden was too new to provide the uninterrupted care a decent elite Virginian grave required.

This conclusion is further supported by one of the strangest episodes concerning the relationship between the living and the dead found in the source material from colonial Virginia: William Byrd II's viewing of his father's remains five years after his death. On January 24th, 1710, William Byrd wrote in his diary that "I had my father's grave opened to see him but he was so wasted there was not anything to be distinguished."¹⁶⁸ By itself, Byrd II's behavior was cryptic. In context however, it begins to make more sense. Two days before, on the 22nd, Byrd II wrote "about 11 o'clock we went to church and before we went in Mr. Harrison's horse ran

¹⁶⁷ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable*, 7.

¹⁶⁸ William Byrd, *The Great American Gentleman, William Byrd of Westover in Virginia: His Secret Diary for the Years 1709-1712*, eds. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 59.

away with his coach and broke down my mother's tombstone."¹⁶⁹ Over the next two days, Byrd II's daughter Evelyn became seriously ill. The same day his mother's tombstone was damaged, his daughter "was indisposed and had a fever, for which I gave her a vomit of the tincture of ipecac."¹⁷⁰ The next day "My daughter slept very well this night and was well this morning, thank God," but that night, the night before he chose to view his father's remains, he "could not sleep all night for the disturbance my daughter gave me."¹⁷¹ Despite Byrd II's reputation as a distant and cold-hearted father, the evidence suggests that his daughter's illness disturbed him greatly. Twenty-six years later, when Evelyn died, Byrd II not only placed the usual death notice in the *Virginia Gazette*, but paid to include a poem to his daughter in the next issue which stands out among contemporary obituaries and death notices in both style and lack of emotional restraint:

Ever constant to her friend,
 Vigilant in truths defense;
 Entertaining to her End,
 Life! brimful of eloquence.
Youth in Person, Age in Sense,
 Nature gave her Store immense

But she's fled, and is no more,
 Yonder soars in Fields of Light!
 Robb'd of all our little Store,
 Death! O Death! we're ruin'd quite.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Byrd, *The Great American*, 59.

¹⁷⁰ Byrd, *The Great American*, 59.

¹⁷¹ Byrd, *The Great American*, 59.

¹⁷² *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, December 9, 1737, No. 71, Pg. 4, Col. 1.

The circumstances surrounding Byrd II's strange behavior then were exactly the kinds of trauma which might have driven a Virginia gentleman to act strangely: the illness of his first born in a time and place in which children often died suddenly, and the damage to his mother's grave. Whatever drove Byrd II to open his father's tomb, the experience was cathartic, as that night he reported that, "I had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty."¹⁷³ Four days later Byrd reported that his father's tomb was complete.

Byrd II's statement that his father was "so wasted there was not anything to be distinguished," raises questions about how quickly decomposition took place in hot and humid Virginia and the impact this could have had on separating Virginia's death-ways from those of England, old and new. The evidence for embalming in the New World is scant, and confined to two mentions from New England.¹⁷⁴ A search of Virginian sources found nothing. Given Virginia's rural character, any embalmers would have been located in Williamsburg and would not have gone unadvertised if they had existed. There were mentions from other colonies, including from frigid New England, of funerals hurried because of rapid decomposition.¹⁷⁵ In Virginia, distance, climate, and the commitment to the display of stability through maintaining the integrity of the deceased combined to make the movement of the corpse over great distances unappealing.

In the *Virginia Gazette*, as mentioned earlier, tales of desecrated and improperly exhumed corpses were featured with some regularity and were typically attached to statements of moral

¹⁷³Bryd, *The Great American*, 59.

¹⁷⁴ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 110 – 111.

¹⁷⁵ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 110 and Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 89 – 91.

condemnation. In the 23rd issue mentioned earlier, for instance, the paper did not simply report the story of a mastiff digging up and consuming corpses from a churchyard (that this story from Dublin was believed to be noteworthy at all was meaningful itself) the report ends with a condemnation of insufficient burial. “If there was more care taken in digging graves deeper than is usually done,” the author states, “such shocking sights might be prevented; the corpse lying so near the surface, the smell proceeding from them, induces these creatures to tear up the Earth to get to them.”¹⁷⁶ This aside was especially telling as the British Isles, unlike the nations of the European continent, had eradicated its wolf population by the twelfth century, meaning that only severe negligence would result in animal desecration.¹⁷⁷ Allowing the remains of their dead to be consumed by animals made the Virginians no better than the Catholic Irish who had allowed a dog to disturb the slumber of the deceased. While such a comparison was unfair, America, after all, was not Britain, and wolves were not eradicated in parts of the colonies until the mid-eighteenth century, it was one more factor indicating Virginia as place where a potential immigrant could not expect a peaceful and dignified death.¹⁷⁸

In fact, when those involved were foreign Catholics, the *Gazette* published such accounts with the scarcely containable excitement typical of voyeuristic enjoyment of the taboo, such as this story from France:

A few Days ago an Appellant Prebend of a near Doway paid the last Debt to Nature, and was buried with the usual Ceremonies; but the Bishop of Arras being inform'd of it, immediately caus'd him to be taken out of his Grave, and put into the Earth again (with his Head downwards) up to the Middle, and the Mould clos'd about him, leaving him his Posteriors and Legs forking

¹⁷⁶ *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, December 31, 1737. No. 23, Pgs. 1-2. Col. 2-1.

¹⁷⁷ Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 20.

¹⁷⁸ Linden-Ward, *Silent City*, 21.

up above the Ground, to the great Scandal of the Spectators; and all this the zealous Bishop did, because the poor Priest had not submitted to the Bull *Unigenitus*: But, unluckily for him, this scandalous and inhuman Action was committed in a Place that is under the Jurisdiction of the Parliament of Paris.¹⁷⁹

This sort of enjoyment of corpse desecration was not unusual in itself. Daniel A. Cohen has convincingly shown that many of the themes of murder, insanity, mutilation and dismemberment that have usually been associated with early-nineteenth-century “Gothic” literature were “not only present, but prominent, in popular English murder publications of the early to mid-seventeenth century.”¹⁸⁰ Fascination with mutilation and murder was one of the reasons that Virginia’s early struggles had been depicted through a focus on unburied, mutilated, and tortured bodies. The writers who discussed Virginia intentionally used language with resonance. Many of these themes were closely connected to disorder, and Cohen argues that those concerned with religious conflict, such as *The Teares of Ireland*, a 1642 pamphlet concerning “horrific atrocities allegedly committed by Irish Catholics against civilians in a military uprising against the ruling Protestants,” in which, “textual descriptions of atrocities were accompanied by engravings that graphically depicted the carnage,” were the most extreme.¹⁸¹ Interestingly, of the two examples of murder pamphlets originating from New World colonies outside of New England one, *The Vain Prodigal Life, and Tragical Penitent Death of Thomas Hellier*, recounted the murders of an indentured servant who while “working on a tobacco plantation in Virginia, slaughtered his master, mistress, and a household maid with an ax,” in 1678.¹⁸² It was not the rarity of the tract but its content which made it meaningful. Unlike

¹⁷⁹ *The Virginia Gazette*, May 6, 1737, No. 41, Pg. 2, Col. 2.

¹⁸⁰ Daniel A. Cohen, “Blood Will Out: Sensationalism, Horror and the Roots of American Crime Literature,” in Isenburg and Burstein, *Mortals Remains*, 32.

¹⁸¹ Cohen, “Blood Will Out,” 39.

¹⁸² Cohen, “Blood Will Out,” 50.

similar pamphlets, *The Vain Prodigal Life* was exceptional in its “surprisingly sociological” focus on the origins of Hellier’s motives, asking questions about whether “there was something about the master-servant relationship in the Chesapeake that had driven him to violence.”¹⁸³ In the pamphlet’s author’s opinion, it was the labor system of Virginia which was ultimately responsible for Hellier’s crimes, both because of the extreme hardship of servant life and conflict arising from the development of master-servant relationships among those who had been social equals in England. The Master and Mistress were partially accountable for their own murder in fact, for “compelling them [servants] unmercifully beyond their strength.”¹⁸⁴ “Hellier’s experience,” one group of historians writes, “poignantly reveals the psychological tensions endemic to the master-servant relationship.”¹⁸⁵ The story of Hellier’s crimes was the most explicit evidence available of the complex interweaving of forced-labor, instability, and graphic violence through which Englishmen viewed Virginia, and possibly then how elite Virginians viewed themselves. Furthermore, the fact that the pamphlet was published a mere two years after the murders illustrates how up to date those in Britain were with the more salacious aspects of colonial life.

There was somewhat less evidence of how a Virginian properly moved from deceased person to safely interred corpse. By the mid eighteenth century, readers could turn to the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* for examples, foreign and domestic, of how a funeral should take place.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ T. H. Breen, James H. Lewis, and Keith Schlesinger, “Motive for Murder: A Servant’s Life in Virginia, 1678,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (January 1983): 106- 120. 106.

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in T.H. Breen, et. al. “Motive for Murder,” 109.

¹⁸⁵ T.H. Breen, et. al. “Motive for Murder,” 110.

¹⁸⁶ Perhaps meaningfully the first instance in which the *Virginia Gazette* describes a burial, beyond simply referring to it as “decent,” is a description of *Mons Teutonicus* from *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, November 5, 1736, No. 15, pg. 2, Col. 2, “upon which his Corpse being opened, his Bowels were buried in the Field of Battle, and his Body sent

For the most part, these followed formulaic standards already well understood for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and reflected the ideal more than reality. A more illuminative example comes from the *Journal of John Harrower*, the journal of an indentured servant who lived in Virginia in the later eighteenth century. Harrower recounted the death and burial, over the course of the four day period between the 10th and 14th of March 1775, of Priscilla Dawson. Dawson died quietly the night of Tuesday the 10th after an undisclosed period of illness from “dropsy.”¹⁸⁷

For the first day, the care of the corpse centered on “sitting up” with the dead overnight. Harrower performed this duty with “Miss Lucy Gaines, Miss Molly White and Mr. Frazer our Overseer.”¹⁸⁸ The next day at sunset, the corpse was “drest in a Calico Goun and white apron [and] was put in a black Walnut Coffin lined with Flanen and pinchback handles. The corps has also a sheet round them.”¹⁸⁹ The “corps” surrounded by a sheet refers to the body/coffin combination, as shrouding a clothed corpse would be both unusual and unnecessary. Either way the covering of the body with clothing, a coffin, and a sheet speaks to an exaggerated concern with maintaining the remains and separating the living from the sight of a decomposing corpse. The practice of sitting up with the dead was ancient and was almost certainly least partly inspired

by Way Genoa, to Gotha, where it was interr’d in the Tomb of the Family.” This fits with the *Gazette’s* willingness to accept corpse mutilation among foreigners. For more representative early accounts of contemporary English death-ways see the description of John Gay’s tombstone in Westminster in *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, October 8, 1736, No. 11, Pg. 4, Col. 1. and the description of Edward Harvey’s funeral in *The Virginia Gazette*, Parks, February 4, 1737, No. 28, Pg. 4, Col. 1.

¹⁸⁷ John Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower: an Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia, 1773-1776*, ed. Edward Miles Riley (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, 1963), 87.

¹⁸⁸ Harrower, *The Journal*, 87.

¹⁸⁹ Harrower, *The Journal*, 87.

in its origins by a fear of wolves and other wild animals devouring an unattended corpse. The organized ritual of sitting up with the dead, the Wake, survived in Virginia even after it declined in England and New England, evidence of the endurance of concern with the corpse that extended beyond what the Reformation allowed in other areas of the British Atlantic World.¹⁹⁰

That Harrower and other servants sat up with the dead raises an interesting issue. Sitting up with the dead in Virginia was a communal event, but a communal event among senior white servants, not the elite as one might have expected. Dawson was the widow of the Rev. Thomas Dawson, “Commissary to the Bishop of London, member of the Council, and President of the College of William and Mary,” and was unquestionably a member of Virginia’s elite.¹⁹¹ And yet, as far as can be discerned from Harrower’s narrative, the people who watched over her in the crucial time between death and burial, during which the corpse and therefore the self was the most vulnerable, were not the elite but their white servants. There was no evidence that Dawson’s daughter, who arrived with her mother three days before Dawson’s death, had any interaction with the remains until the grave was finally “closed up” four days later. In the end, it was Harrower who “screwed down the lid of the Coffin” at 10am on the third day, and with two other senior servants (both overseers), placed Dawson, safely encased within clothing, her coffin, and one presumes the final sheet, in a “Chair Carriage which was drove by a Niger to Snow Creek grave Yard.”¹⁹² Of all the more elite members household, only Harrower’s master accompanied the corpse to the graveyard. There the corps was lain “in the Grave which was betwixt five and six foot deep and filled the grave half up with earth and then overlaid it with

¹⁹⁰ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 161.

¹⁹¹ Harrower, *The Journal*, 185n89.

¹⁹² Harrower, *The Journal*, 87.

plank and so left it.”¹⁹³ The Funeral did not take place until the next day, the first event in the transition from rotting corpse to safely entombed remains at which Harrower mentions the presence of “the daughter of the deceased.” Afterwards, the grave was filled and “fully closed up.”¹⁹⁴

The process of closing up is itself worth discussing. Given that the death and funeral took place in early March, only two days before a series of “very keen” frosts, it was unlikely that rapid decomposition caused the day early half-burial.¹⁹⁵ The timing of the early burial conforms nicely with the three day period between death and interment traditional for early modern Anglicans.¹⁹⁶ The fact that even after the grave was half filled those burying Mrs. Dawson still felt it necessary to place planks over the top suggests that the purpose of the early burial was not the preservation of the body from harm. Instead the relegation of corpse care to the most highly trusted white servants, the early burial and the fact that Colonel Daingerfield was the only elite white to attend the corpse’s preliminary commitment to the ground, vividly displays the distance maintained by the elite between themselves and their own dead. Only once the corpse was already securely underground were most elites exposed to its presence.

The people who sat up with Dawson then were not her kith and kin but servants, as were the people who did most of the burying. Whatever might be said of Virginia’s elite then, in the moments between death and burial, the care of even the most elite corpses was relegated to subordinate members of the household. This consigning of the elite cadaver to the servants

¹⁹³ Harrower, *The Journal*, 87.

¹⁹⁴ Harrower, *The Journal*, 87.

¹⁹⁵ Harrower, *The Journal*, 88.

¹⁹⁶ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 136.

shows the awkwardness and finely disguised uneasiness with which the colony's gentry approached the corpse in its physical actuality.

More illustrative of elite Virginian's thinking on the corpse were the symbols with which they chose to surround and conceptually outline death. Virginia stood out among the colonies by avoiding images of the decayed corpse in their funerary art. Death-heads, skeletons, hour-glasses, and other examples of *Memento Mori* imagery were so famously ubiquitous in the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England and the New England colonies that they define most people's understanding of colonial death-ways. Such imagery was not solely a New England phenomena either, however. Tombstones depicting corpse imagery were heavily represented in the Deep South too, especially in South Carolina and Georgia.¹⁹⁷ The same sorts of symbols are pervasive in Jamaica as well.¹⁹⁸ While such images were occasionally used in Virginia, they were rare.

Instead Virginia's elite tended toward "quoting" architectural elements in their tombs, which strongly connected the graves with the plantation houses which were so often close to the burial site.¹⁹⁹ Virginians with the wealth to do so regularly imported stone, and often pre-carved monuments, from England.²⁰⁰ This should not be taken as evidence of the slavish mimicry of English forms on the part of elite Virginians, however. An ocean separated England from the New World; stone was an expensive cargo, and the attitudes of Virginians defined which aspects

¹⁹⁷ See Diana Williams Combs, *Early Gravestone Art in Georgia and South Carolina*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

¹⁹⁸ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 61, 236-242.

¹⁹⁹ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 150-151 and Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 271 -278.

²⁰⁰ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 265.

of English tomb architecture crossed the Atlantic. When *momento mori* imagery was popular in England, it largely failed to show up in Virginia. Jamaica's planters imported most of their monuments from England and yet when English carvers turned to producing the classical architectural forms that were popular in Virginia, and portraiture forms which Virginians never took to, the tombs of Jamaica's elite still featured "mourning figures, cherubs, cornucopias, urns and draperies' rather than the majestic portraiture so popular in English sculpture."²⁰¹ When English tomb architecture changed again in the mid-eighteenth century to incorporate designs based on new archeological discoveries about building forms from the classical world, Virginians opted out of the change, continuing to build or import monuments with designs which reflected the architecture of the colonies already existing plantation houses, churches, court houses, and other important buildings.²⁰² After 1750 when Virginians began shifting away from importing English tombstones towards the use of locally sourced stone and imported monuments from New England the innate conservatism of Virginia's elite meant that tomb styles stayed relatively the same.²⁰³ There was little to no evidence that *momento mori* imagery became common even after the increase in imports from New England.

This conservatism in burial monuments points to a central fact about Virginian thinking on the importance of the corpse. As Butler puts it, "as a symbolic statement, the use of this [older] style suggests that, to the Virginians, the appropriate design of commemoration was the same design tradition used in life."²⁰⁴ It suggests more than this, in fact. It suggests that for

²⁰¹ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 236.

²⁰² Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 271.

²⁰³ M. Ruth Little, *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13.

²⁰⁴ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 271.

Virginia's elite, the dead never fully died. Conceptually, they simply moved residence in a way that Virginians went out of their way to make as inconsequential as possible. By burying near the plantation house, the center of power in Virginia's largely rural landscape, in tombs that drew concrete conceptual lines back to the house in which the deceased had lived, and which his or her descendants still inhabited, Virginians attempted to minimize the disruption inherent in death. Tombs became rooms of the big house, or at most outbuildings. They were monuments to the stability of a family's power over their land, and when compared to rough slave cemeteries and exposed corpses of disobedient slaves, they were monuments that reiterated the white family's claim to dominance over their human property. They were, in short, advertisements for stability, legitimacy and control.

In this, the imposing, building-like, rectangular box tombs of Virginia's elite also explicitly set Virginian death-ways apart from those of the Puritans, reinforcing the colonies' commitment to high church Anglican forms. New England Puritans interred their corpses in communal grave yards marked by tombstones, which existed primarily to perform the didactic function of reminding the living of the fate of all flesh. Influential preachers such as Increase Mather could state that "to praise the dead is to praise corruptible flesh...to praise memory is to worship the dead."²⁰⁵ Virginia's Anglicans practiced a form of what Mather railed against, surrounding their tombs with symbolism of incorruptible stability, perpetuity and sustained memory. Virginians did not "worship" the dead, but they used them as more than warnings of the living's own eventual dissolution.

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Linden-Ward, *Silent City*, 25.

This avoidance of graphic depictions of death among Virginians characterizes other aspects of the colonist's material culture. Winner draws our attention to the fact that "while New England mourning rings frequently featured 'death's heads, skeletons, coffins, and other reminders of the frailty of life,'" only rarely were similar images placed on mourning rings in Virginia.²⁰⁶ Instead, Virginia's mourning jewelry tended toward the inclusion of phrases such as "When you see this remember me," and Winner goes so far as to state that "in Virginia, this mourning jewelry functioned principally as a *momento mei* rather than a *momento mori*."²⁰⁷ Virginian mourning jewelry functioned as daily reminders, not of the inevitability of death, but of the memory of a specific loved one, a further expression of an approach to death which emphasized continuity over inevitable social breakage.

Part of what makes this strong aversion to the decaying corpse among Virginia's elite so unusual was that English devotional literature, which was widely read and may have played an exaggerated role in forming personal beliefs in the largely clergy-less colony, was open about purification. William Sherlock's *A Practical Discourse Concerning Death* and Richard Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man*, which Byrd read "at least twice," both make casual references to rotting cadavers at odds with how Virginians approached the corpse.²⁰⁸ To Sherlock, the body will "rot and petrify in the grave," a process which Sherlock defined as "a curse and a punishment," for original sin.²⁰⁹ The earthly body, as distinct from the resurrected

²⁰⁶Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 162.

²⁰⁷ Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith*, 162.

²⁰⁸ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 68. Both Sherlock and Allestree's works were popular in Virginia throughout the later colonial period and both were published by Parks while he was the printer in Williamsburg; in 1744 and 1746 respectively.

²⁰⁹ Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse*, 4-5 and 17.

spiritual body, was “food for worms” and “Death will spoil those Features and Colours which are now admired; and after a short time, there will be no Distinction between this beautiful body, and common dust.”²¹⁰ Though man was built with immortality in mind, his body carried within it from the beginning the potential for death, as “man was made of the Dust of the earth, and therefore was by Nature mortal, (for that which is made of dust is by Nature corruptible).”²¹¹

Allestree was less concerned with the corpse, as might be expected given that his book was not principally concerned with death. When he did turn to the body, however, his language was similar to Sherlock’s. It “is only the Husk or shell of the soul, a lump of flesh, subject to many diseases and Pains while it lives, and at last to death itself; and then ‘tis so far from being valued, that ‘tis not to be endured above ground, but laid to rot in the Dirt.”²¹² The key to understanding how Virginia’s elite embraced both this type of language and their own commitment to the maintained corpse lay not with language but theology. Both Sherlock and Allestree embraced the free-will Arminian theology of High-Church Anglicanism, a doctrine which allowed considerable space for good works as part of salvation. Both writers stepped back from the full renunciation of the body popular among Puritans, and as Butler has pointed out, both encourage the maintenance of the body “out of respect for the image of God and as evidence of concern for God’s gift of life and health.”²¹³ This allowed Virginians the ability to shift focus from *memento mori* images to graves which celebrated their worldly achievements.

²¹⁰ Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse*, 41 – 46.

²¹¹ Sherlock, *A Practical Discourse*, 3.

²¹² Richard Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man*, re-print, Williamsburg: Parks, viii.

²¹³ Butler, “Knowing the Uncertainties,” 68; referring to Sherlock, *Practical Discourse*, 153-154 and Allestree, *The Whole Duty*, 142.

For example, Byrd II's tombstone (which made no mention of his faith), Butler correctly argues, shows Byrd II "celebrating his temporal works as evidence of his qualification for Salvation, for all were 'good works' and all were 'moral.'"²¹⁴ Virginia's gentry, unlike that of New England, had the opportunity to substitute worldly achievement for *momento mori* symbolism because Arminianism gave them a way out, a way to display their "qualification for Salvation" in death which Calvinist Puritans did not have. By emphasizing temporal works (and familiar and friendly connections as Byrd II's memorial did), Virginians could highlight the cultural and economic ties of a stable society, the legitimacy of which had been questioned by the trials of the seventeenth century and the inherent instability and violence of slavery in the eighteenth.

As with so much else involving Virginian's death-ways, Virginian burial practices developed in direct rejection of those of the enslaved population. As mentioned above, the leadership of the colony had twice attempted to control or outright ban slave funerals in the seventeenth century, including a 1678 law which forbade all public funerals for slaves.²¹⁵ With a change in spirituality, however, came a change in that relationship. As mentioned above, Mechal Sobel has argued that the late eighteenth century saw active cultural exchange between non-elite white and black people as a result of the shared experience of the Great Awakening; an exchange that can be seen in the adoption of African style burial decoration in some non-elite white graveyards.²¹⁶ If this was true it would mean that white burial (and possibly then, elite burial given the social mobility inherent among whites in a colonial economy) was far more adaptive and sensitive to external pressures than has previously been observed. It would be more

²¹⁴ Butler, "Knowing the Uncertainties," 76.

²¹⁵ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 329.

²¹⁶ Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 271.

evidence that the uniqueness of burial among Virginia's elite originated through dialogue with African forms.

This dialogue among elite, white, Virginians however was not one of the direct cultural borrowing of African forms, as grave ornamentation was among poorer whites. Instead, elite white's responded to the environment they had created themselves. Just as the cannibalism and unburied bodies of the early seventeenth century put a premium on the expression of stability, the ability to ensure the integrity of the corpse set Planters apart from slaves in a way both stark and, ideally, permanent. That planters were aware of slave concerns for corpse integrity was amply shown by the way in which they put that knowledge to use in enforcing mastery. By using tombs that projected stability to display the sacredness and solidity of white bodies, planters juxtaposed their dead with the dead of those below them. Home burial, building like tombs, and the avoidance of *memento mori* worked together as a double-sided advertisement for two ideas directed towards two different audiences. For whites, especially Englishmen, they covered the shameful past and clothed an insecure system in the image of stability, all the while weaving together the systems of mutual support that turned that stability into something resembling reality. For slaves, the solid monumental tombs of whites reinforced the gulf that separated white and black, and projected white domination into the afterlife. In a colony with few towns, where daily life centered for the most part on the plantation or small farm, how human remains were treated and memorialized was a central pillar to the creation and maintenance of the social order of early Virginia.

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