

## Death and Burials

Cistercians viewed death, not as the end of life, but as the beginning of the true life that monastic life was but a preparation. Choir monks and lay brothers were treated as equals in death. The same procedures were followed for both, they received the same prayers and were buried in the same cemetery. When death was imminent the monk or brother was laid out on the ground on a blanket covered mat or straw. A wooden tablet or gong was repeatedly struck, calling the community to assemble at the deathbed. The Litany and the Seven Penitential Psalms were said, and when a lay brother died the Office of Commendation was also said. After death the body was washed and then taken in procession to the church where a continuous intercession of psalm recitals was held until the funeral Mass. After burial each priest said three Masses, each cleric one hundred and fifty Psalms, others one hundred and fifty recitals of the *miserere*, or *pater noster*s if the former was not known.

Abbots were typically buried in the chapter house, and from the last quarter of the thirteenth century, also in the church. Each burial was marked by an abbatial grave slab that was integrated into the floor. Initially, abbatial grave slabs had few distinguishing marks other than perhaps an engraving of a crozier, however, over time, and as a reflection of the enhanced status of abbots, abbatial grave slabs become more elaborate with full sized effigies and inscriptions.

Until 1147, no others were permitted to be buried within the precinct boundary, however, from 1147, the servants of an abbey who died within the precinct boundary were allowed to be buried in the monastic cemetery. In 1180, a General Chapter statute permitted secular burials within abbey churches but limited to kings, queens and bishops; in 1316 this was expanded to include other prelates of the Church. In 1197, the General Chapter permitted burials in the monastic cemetery of founders and those others 'who could not be refused without causing a scandal'; entitlement being determined at the discretion of the abbot. This was regularized in 1202 to founders and their descendants, guests (who died whilst staying in an abbey guesthouse), and two *familiares* (supporters or patrons of the abbey) with their wives and servants. By 1217, lay burials in abbey cemeteries had become common practice that only required a licence from the secular parish priest of the 'applicant' in question, whilst General Chapter focus shifted to specific burial locations within the precinct for differing lay status, with explicit prohibition of any lay burial in the most sacred places - the chapter house, the church and the cloistral arcades. By 1300, permissions had changed again and chapels - specifically for the burial of founders, benefactors, other patrons, their families and descendants, began to be established at the eastern end of church naves. Aristocratic lay burials also began to be located in the monks choir at this time.

Known burials in Sawtry abbey include:

Margaret of Huntingdon, Duchess of Brittany (d.1201); daughter of Henry of Scotland and Ada de Warenne, sister of King Malcom IV of Scotland and King William I 'The Lion' of Scotland, married to - (1) Conan IV, Duke of Brittany (1160), (2) Humphrey III de Bohun, Hereditary Constable of England (1171), (3) Sir William fitz Patrick de Hertburn (1183).

David "Etherington" de Huntingdon, 8th Earl of Huntingdon (d.1219); son of Henry of Scotland and Ada de Warenne, grandson of King David I of Scotland and Maud (2nd Countess of Huntingdon), younger brother of King Malcom IV of Scotland and King William I 'The Lion' of Scotland, married to Matilda de Kevelioc (Meschines) of Chester.

Matilda (Maud) de Kevelioc (Meschines) of Chester, Countess of Huntingdon (d.1233); married to David de Huntingdon.

Isabella de Brus (d.1252); second daughter of David de Huntingdon and Matilda de Kevelioc (Meschines) of Chester, married to Robert de Brus IV Annandale.

It was also recorded in Scots Peerage that Robert de Brus IV Annandale (d.1245) - great grandfather of King Robert I of Scotland and married to Isabella de Brus, was buried in Sawtry abbey; but this is considered unlikely as, at the time of his death, Guisborough Priory was the burial location of choice for the de Brus family.

## Notes

*miserere* - alternate term for Psalm 51 due to the opening words, '*Miserere mei, Deus*'  
*pater noster* - Roman Catholic version of the Lord's Prayer in Latin

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