

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the rarely questioned relationship between dead bodies, sepulchres and power in late medieval Iberia. It is widely accepted that tombs of royalty played a crucial role in the political development of various regional centres in Castile, as their distribution across a multiplicity of churches and monasteries spoke of a desire to favour particular institutions. However, the reason for such a privileging of graves as vehicles of power remains under-analysed. History of art tends to treat sepulchres as sculptural installations, without giving due consideration to the presence of cadavers within. Nonetheless, as it is precisely the interred corpse which distinguishes tombs from other types of monuments, I believe that dead bodies are crucial for understanding funerary art.

Most scholars of the Middle Ages have considered theological writings about dead bodies, and burial rites and customs, as separate, thus drawing a sharp divide between theory and practice. Katharine Park took a different approach for understanding the relation between the written and the material cadaver. In her account, the usual division was replaced by a geographical boundary between northern and southern Europe. She proposed that in France, England, or Germany the dead body was understood to continue to be the carrier of the person to whom it had belonged until it decayed, whereas in Italy the moment of death severed all links between the body and the soul. Park explicitly excluded Iberia from her idea of the south since, in her opinion, customs there were markedly different from those of the Apennine Peninsula. I would like to explore her criteria, that is, the absence of embalming and the practice of multiple burials. I will argue that, in general, Castilian funerary rites did conform to Park's southern model. The dead body in late medieval Castile was truly defunct.