Burial Customs in the Middle Ages

Beliefs and superstitions about death have influenced funeral practices for centuries. Shakespeare reflected some of these rituals in Romeo and Juliet.

Verona Prince Mastino II della Scala was buried in 1365. His tomb sits beside a handful of other Scala tombs. It is thought that the character of Prince Escalus in Romeo and Juliet is fashioned from this family.

During the Middle Ages in Italy, the dead were sometimes buried at night, and pallbearers carried flickering torches representing the uncertainties of life.

Processions and feasts have been a part of funeral traditions for centuries. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the body would be carried to the tomb by pallbearers as the mourners followed it through town. A celebration followed that included eating, drinking, dancing, and music.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Catholic religion forbade cremation. Instead, bodies were placed in individual and family tombs, often above ground.

During the Middle Ages, it was believed that the dead should be kept close to their loved ones. For this reason, catacombs (underground tombs) were often built beneath churches and cities. To keep the dead informed of current happenings, it was acceptable to talk out loud in church.

Coffins were used during the Middle Ages but became more popular during the Renaissance. It was illegal for poor people to have coffins, so their bodies were just placed in the ground to decompose quickly.

In the Middle Ages, people were usually buried with coins on their eyes, in the belief that the money would pay the dead person's way into the next world.

Tales were often told of people who were buried alive. Sometimes a body was placed in an unsealed casket and buried in a shallow grave to permit an escape, if necessary.

Bells have been tolled (rung) to announce a person's death since the Middle Ages. There are various explanations for this practice. One account says that the bell is tolled to scare off evil spirits in the area. Another tale says that the tolling of the bell calls spirits home.