Topographies of the afterlife
Reconsidering infant burials in medieval mortuary space

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Abstract
Across societies, deaths which take place in early infancy often trigger distinctive responses in burial practices, signifying the ambivalent social status of those who died before they really lived. This paper focuses on burial practices in medieval Central Europe pertaining to children who died before, during, or shortly after birth. It discusses the relationship between medieval laity, ecclesiastic power, and social space, using three medieval cemeteries in Switzerland and Austria as examples. By integrating considerations of medieval practices of infant baptism, afterlife topography, and social theories of space, a methodological and interpretative framework is outlined and employed for approaching burials of early-deceased infants, the social dimension of related local burial practices, and processes of power negotiation between medieval laypeople and church authorities.

Keywords
afterlife, baptism, burial space, Central Europe, early-infancy death, landscape, middle ages, mortuary archaeology, social space

Introduction
In medieval Europe the engagement with children who died before, during, or shortly after birth was closely linked to their baptismal status. As a means to clear the soul from Original Sin, baptism constituted the most profound rite of passage within Christianity. It inevitably preconditioned a person’s acceptance into the Christian community and thus also afforded the possibility to resurrect on Doomsday. Consequently, those who died without baptism had no
hope for salvation, including infants. In the 12th and 13th century, scholastics like Thomas Aquinas strongly promoted the idea that unbaptized infants would be eternally confined to an isolated place at the margins of Hell: the so-called limbus puerorum (Le Goff, 1990: 220–221).

These theological considerations were not only theoretical but became a major concern for families. For Central Europe, written records of medieval sermons show that parish priests or travelling clergymen such as Berthold of Regensburg delivered the message of the unbaptized’s unfortunate fate directly to laypeople (see Pfeiffer, 1852: 126). On the other hand, baptized infants who had died soon after birth were considered to have particularly pure souls, as this associated them with the cult of the Holy Innocents – the infants who had lost their lives in the course of Herod’s attempt to kill the Baby Jesus (Wasylis, 2008: 47–48). Somehow similar to the infant martyrs, children who had died shortly after baptism were thought of as resurrecting immediately or at least dwelling in Earthly Paradise until Doomsday (Gilchrist, 2012: 207).

Baptism thus created a powerful chasm at the beginning of a person’s life, with those dying before bridging it being condemned forever, and those mastering it immediately being saved. The post-mortem separation was further reinforced by burial directives that denied unbaptized children a Christian funeral in consecrated ground. E.g. Durand of Mende’s Rationale Divinorum Officiorum (c. 1286: Buijsen, 1974) prescribed the exclusion of unbaptized children from Christian cemeteries and remained one of the most influential liturgical manuals in Catholic Central Europe until the 18th century. Such directives translated unbaptized infants’ marginalization in the afterlife into a physical exclusion from the cemetery. Parents and families thus were left with the horrifying prospect of their infants’ eternal damnation as well as physical expulsion from the Christian community. Driven by this negative outlook, all kinds of fears surrounded the corpse and soul of the unbaptized in folk belief, ranging from the unfortunate souls becoming restless spirits that could approach or even harm the living (compare Doulet, 2002: 354; Kleinhans, 2012: 224), to the abuse of their bodies by witches (Blauert, 1989: 62–63). To counteract the danger of babies dying unbaptized, emergency baptism was strongly advocated by the Church from the 13th century onwards. Any layperson was required to administer baptism when a child’s life was at stake during a complicated birth (Signori, 2013: 236, 243).

Burials of infants therefore present a valuable expedient to explore attitudes toward early-infancy death within lay culture; laypeople’s acknowledgment of, subversion to, or even resistance against ecclesiastic control and theological sovereignty; and thus the production of medieval social fabric. Archaeologists excavating medieval Christian cemeteries across Europe often encounter infant burials that form more or less obvious clusters within the burial ground. Only a few studies have dealt with such burials in detail (e.g. Craig-Atkins, 2014; Crawford, 2013; Gardela and Duma, 2013; Hausmair, 2013; Ulrich-Bochsler, 1997). However, the distinct funerary treatment of very young children has been highlighted repeatedly in more encompassing studies of medieval cemeteries (e.g. Čechura, 2011; Gilchrist and Sloan, 2005; Hadley, 2010; Slivka, 1997). Interpretations of the diverse
practices observable in the material record often remain vague, though. On the one hand there seems to be a concern about over-interpretation since the written evidence seems to be quite clear on the unbaptized’s post-mortem fate and related burial regulation as well as the seemingly widespread practice of emergency baptism theoretically should render burial of unbaptized children in Christian cemeteries impossible (Gilchrist and Sloan, 2005: 72). At the same time, the frequent occurrence of distinct funerary treatment of very young children is recognized as indicator for possibly illicit burial of unbaptized children or practices which may not have followed official regulation or theological teachings. Archaeological interpretation is further impeded by limitations of osteological age determination. The age groups considered to most likely qualify for burials of unbaptized children are foetuses and perinates as well as neonates and infants, the latter two being the most frequently represented group in burial records (see publications quoted above). However, it is not always possible to accurately assess the exact age of death or whether a fully developed child was born alive or dead due to bone preservation, variation in bone development, or methodological limitations (for a detailed discussion see Scheuer and Black, 2004). Effectively, a kind of general interpretation of infant burial clusters as reflecting ambivalent attitudes toward early-infancy death has developed, creating the impression that people engaged in similar practices across medieval Europe (compare Craig-Atkins, 2014; Gardela and Duma, 2013; Slivka, 1997).

This paper challenges generalizing views of the funerary treatment of unbaptized and baptized children in medieval Europe. It highlights the need for more profound micro-analyses of individual burial sites in order to understand local responses to early-infancy death, while enabling a broader discussion on the interaction of medieval laity and clergy. By drawing on data from three medieval cemeteries located in Austria and Switzerland, I will exemplify how a detailed analysis of age distributions and spatial patterns can reveal distinct practices and allows for more differentiated interpretations regarding the baptismal status of infants. This first requires a critical reconsideration of baptism practices derived from historical sources and the common assumption that by the later Middle Ages almost no infants remained unbaptized even when dying during birth. For the archaeological analysis of infants in mortuary space, I propose an analytical framework based on H. Kuper’s (1972) and P. Bourdieu’s (1989) reflections on social space and M. Eliade’s (1959) elaborations on religious space. Cemeteries, church architecture and landscape are conceptualized as social (re)constructions of medieval afterlife topography and flexible spaces where social structures and identities are consolidated, contested and/or redefined. I will demonstrate for the three case studies how the specific situatedness of infant burials in relation to medieval social, material and afterlife topography reveals locally rooted and regionally specific attitudes toward early-infancy death and a high degree of lay agency regarding related burial practices. The interpretation of the presented data serves as a basis for a broader reflection on local popular practices and how they may contribute to a larger understanding of the interaction between laypeople and church authorities in medieval Central Europe.

**Death, personhood and medieval baptism in Central Europe**
Due to increasing concerns over unbaptized children’s post-mortem fate and high levels of infant mortality, baptism practices in Central Europe had shifted by the 13th century from traditional seasonal baptism on Easter and Pentecost (Cramer, 1993: 138) to baptism soon after birth (Singman, 1999). Although most priests baptized babies within a month after birth, the situation of children who died during/shortly after birth or of non-viable foetuses who nevertheless were seen as persons with immortal souls, remained critical.

Christian conceptions of personhood evolved from classical ideas about the duality of human nature (body/soul). It was believed that at some point during pregnancy God would infuse the foetal body with a soul, transforming the non-human flesh into a person (Labarge, 1986: 22). Although animated through the divine spirit, the unborn was nevertheless considered to be burdened with Original Sin, which left the child in a critical, semi-human state of being that could only be resolved through baptism (Schwarz, 2006).

To overcome this difficult situation, it was the religious authorities themselves who, especially from the 13th century onwards, not only allowed but even demanded that every layperson grant emergency baptism if necessary (Signori, 2013: 236, 243). Councils and synods such as the ones held at Paris (1196–1208), Mainz (1233), Trier (1277), or Chartres (1355–68), whose resolutions set the directions for clergy across Central Europe, repeatedly mandated the instruction of laypeople on the correct performance of baptism. The Council of Trier (1310) (Schmitz-Esser, 2014: 485) and the Synod of Paris (1311) (Taglia, 2001: 84) were among the first to explicitly mention midwives’ responsibilities in these matters. This unprecedented concession of religious power to the laity was, however, ambivalent. Confirmation of the validity of emergency baptism was still in the hands of the clergy, who – based on testimonies of persons present at birth – decided whether the rite had been performed correctly or not. Accusations of either wrongly performed rites, unnecessary emergency baptism or – even worse – baptism of an already dead child left midwives in particular in a fragile position. Several court files from France show that misconduct could lead to legal prosecution, as did failure to perform the rite in cases of danger (for examples see Jacquart, 1981; Labarge, 1986; Taglia, 2001). In German-speaking Europe first ordinances for midwives were introduced in the second half of the 15th century and included obligations for emergency baptism as well as directives for physical and material punishment of midwives in case of dereliction (Kruse, 1999: 119, 175). Only few trials against midwives are known from Switzerland (compare records on late medieval trials in Blauert, 1989; Rippmann, 2002; Terrier and Touati, 2002) and Austria – in the latter case medieval legal sources are generally rare. Nevertheless, midwives’ ambivalent status as well as the substantial fear of bodies of unbaptized children is apparent in early treatises on sorcery which herald the dawn of the early modern witchcraze. In the Malleus Maleficarum (1486), one of the most notorious treatises on witchcraft which circulated in German-speaking Europe until the 17th century, midwives are described as the most evil of witches and references are made to cases in western Switzerland where women were accused of stealing, killing, and eating unbaptized babies (Schmidt, 1923: 22, 65). Likewise the early-15th-century Formicarius and Errores Gazarioarium refer to occurrences of witchcraft in western Switzerland where women were accused of abducting infants or producing ointments from the
bodies of unbaptized children (Blauert, 1989: 62–63; Chène, 2002). As various scholars have pointed out (e.g. Labarge, 1986; Taglia, 2001), such records may reflect the precarious situation of the women involved in the birthing process, as well as the intense concern over the post-mortem fate of the unbaptized and the dangerous state attributed to their bodies and souls.

What I would like to note, however, is that the abovementioned records also raise questions of how thoroughly emergency baptism was actually practiced across medieval Central Europe and how many children may have died unbaptized during birth despite the sacramental contingency plan. The fact that the obligation for administering emergency baptism was repeatedly pronounced in synods, councils and midwife ordinances (see above) over a course of more than 250 years may indicate that in many instances laypeople did not follow the directives. It needs to be contemplated that authorities probably had a reason to repeatedly reinforce their demands for emergency baptism. The prosecution of midwives accused of mishandling critical situations evidenced in France as well as the defamation of midwives in witchcraft treatises additionally raises the question of whether laypeople and local clergy trusted midwives’ abilities, or whether the validity of a christening performed under duress was regarded with suspicion.

Also the emergence of late medieval/early modern miracle baptisms suggests that emergency baptism in central Europe was either not as widespread a practice as often assumed, or that its validity was questioned. The phenomenon of miracle baptisms – a practice in which parents took their stillborn children to special sanctuaries where they would be miraculously revived for a short period in order to be baptized – is evidenced since the late 14th century by miracle books (Labouvie, 1998: 176–177; Pahud de Mortanges, 2014). Although not approved and thus penalized by bishops and the Pope, several hundred [sic!] sanctuaries that performed such rites existed in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Southern Germany, Austria, and Northern Italy by the beginning of the 16th century (on the noticeable extent of this practice see Gélis, 2006).

One of the most frequented centres for miracle baptisms in late medieval Switzerland was the shrine of the Holy Virgin in Oberbüren. In a letter to the Roman Curia in 1486, the Bishop of Konstanz asked for the penalization of no less than 2000 women for bringing their dead children to the shrine for post-mortem baptism (Ulrich-Bochsler, 1997: 112). Excavations at Oberbüren revealed approximately 200 late medieval burials of children, most of them of premature age (presumably stillborn) or only a few days old (Ulrich-Bochsler, 1997: 114–115). In this unique case, where the problematic status of the buried children is evidenced by both archaeological and written records, the age distribution of the buried infants shows clearly that although stillborn infants were mostly in need of the miraculous baptism rite, children surviving birth also seem to have died (infrequently) without baptism (see Table 1).

This complex situation should make us wary of attempts to identify unbaptized children predominantly on the basis of biological age. Neither do skeletal remains of premature age provide evidence for the lack of baptism, nor does an age determination that indicates a
child’s survival of at least a few days or weeks after birth serve as a solid argument to identify an individual as baptized child. We also need to be aware of the high likelihood that many babies buried in churchyards actually were baptized due to the restrictive burial regulations of the time and spatial cluster may refer more likely to the innocent status of their souls than an ambivalent attitude (Gilchrist, 2012: 49, 221). It is nevertheless necessary to attempt a more thoroughly grounded suggestion for the distinction between baptized and unbaptized children in order to move beyond generalizing ‘either-or’ explanations and get a better understanding of negotiation processes between laity and clergy.

**Topographies of the afterlife and social space**

The approach I propose in this paper is based on an integration of detailed age analysis with the specific situatedness of infants in medieval burial space and afterlife topography. As will be shown in the archaeological examples below, it is crucial to pay particular attention to how physical locations of infant burials both within a given cemetery and the wider medieval landscape were connected to medieval notions of post-mortem space and the way people categorized and perceived the material world in relation to the structure of the afterlife.

A lot of discussions in sociology and anthropology have focused on the relationships between social structure, its formation through social interaction, and the material world in/through which this interaction takes place (see Reed-Danahay, 2015). Both H. Kuper (1972) and P. Bourdieu (1989) have argued that the positions social agents may acquire and also change within social space – that is, the web of social relations created through social interaction – are not necessarily, or simply, determined by the physical proximity of social agents to one another in the material world. But ‘social relations are articulated through particular sites, associated with different messages and ranges of communication’ (Kuper, 1972: 420).

As such, medieval burials or more precisely the placing of deceased infants in relation to the layout of the church or the local medieval landscape must be thought of as integral to processes of signifying and categorizing the material world. Mortuary practices are essential for consolidating the social equilibrium when it is shaken by death. Through enacting shared beliefs, but also different readings of them in the framework of burial and mourning rituals, social relationships can be strengthened but also renegotiated. The places of infant burial thus may be indicative of the deceased’s baptismal status when put in the context of the spatial categories active in medieval society. Their relative location, distance, or proximity to and within the sacred topography of the church or local area may indicate how people conceived of the children in relation to their community. Also, hopes related to the status of infants (as opposed to their actual status) may have been expressed by burying children in distinctly categorized places that correlated to preferable regions of the afterlife. In the next section I will therefore give a brief, though more specific outline of conceptions and categories of medieval space, and their (re)production in the material world in order to establish an analytical framework for analysing infant burials in their specific spatial context.

*Imago mundi and medieval mortuary space*
In his influential work on religious dynamics, M. Eliade (1959) noted that societies tend to reproduce the cosmic structure that underpins their understanding of the world in their material environment in order to enable the communication between different cosmic spheres. While I share the critique of Eliade’s underlying assumption of universal religious structures coupled with a cross-cultural approach for his analyses (e.g. Meier and Tillessen, 2014), I consider some of his core concepts still valuable as analytical tools when aiming to understand historical communities and processes of making the world around them understandable and liveable (compare Oestigaard, 2011: 85–86). A key element of Eliade’s considerations is the axis mundi: a central pillar that connects the spheres of the living, the dead, and the divine. Eliade conceived the axis mundi not only as a metaphysical construct but as a connection realized in the material world in actual physical entities such as significant landmarks or built structures (Eliade, 1959: 36). Through ritual and everyday practices people organize their life around the axis in accordance with their conception of the cosmos. By defining thresholds and spaces demarcated by physical structures as well as social constraints, they recreate the cosmos and its sacred centre in their immediate surroundings, multiple times, and on various scales – the imago mundi (image of the world) (Eliade, 1959: 35, 44, 82). For Judaean-Christian religions, which are based on a cosmos comprised of spatially distinct spheres (heaven, earth, and underworld), this model offers a valuable perspective for exploring medieval peoples’ perception and interaction with the material world on different scales. To put medieval burials into their physical and metaphysical spatial context, it is necessary to understand how this overarching cosmology was materially realized in the Middle Ages.

Theological discourse about the constitution of the cosmos became increasingly concerned with the spatiality of earthly and post-mortem spheres in the 11th and 12th century, leading to the emergence of several distinct places: Earth (the living); Heaven (Holy Trinity, angels and saints, possibly ‘innocent’ children); Paradise (righteous Christians; possibly ‘innocent’ children); Purgatory (ordinary Christian sinners); Hell (non-Christians; Christians who had committed grave sins); limbus patrum (forefathers of the Old Testament); and the limbus puerorum (unbaptized children) (Le Goff, 1990: 220–221). In the medieval built environment and landscape we encounter the (re)creation of this cosmos in multiple contexts and on various scales. Most medieval church buildings in Austria and Switzerland (like in most of Christian Europe) recreated this structure through architectural means and liturgical practices enacted inside (Figure 1) (Kilde, 2008; Schleif, 2005: 224–225). Along the west-east oriented axis of the church building, the chancel containing the altar was commonly located in the East, from where Christ was believed to appear on Doomsday. Spatially separated from the nave through the rood screen and only accessible to the clergy, the altar was transformed into the axis mundi every time the transubstantiation was enacted, connecting Earth with the Heavenly Kingdom. Opposite to the chancel, the western entrance for laypeople demarcated the threshold between the darkness outside of Christianity and the community of Christ. Baptismal fonts were usually positioned in this liminal space close to the western entrance (Roemer, 1997), materializing the meaning of baptism as the gateway to Christianity. The corpses of faithful Christians lying in consecrated ground outside the holy house resembled
the souls of the dead who were dwelling in Purgatory outside of Heaven (Hausmair, 2015: 310), with a grave close to the sanctuary increasing the deceased’s proximity to Heaven. This architectural production of the *imago mundi* was infused with meaning through spatially rooted liturgical practice that created a structure in which every participant acquired a distinct position based on principles of exclusion and inclusion. The burning of incense, lightning of candles, chanting of verses and ritualized bodily movements fostered a multisensory experience of the cosmos in the local church (Gilchrist, 2012: 169).

In the wider landscape, places of worship built on exposed, highly visible landmarks can also be understood as expression of the divine order. Again a central *axis* was created that allowed people moving through the landscape to experience the structure of the cosmos through their own position relative to the central structure.

I would argue that this structuring does not only signify a reproduction of the cosmos. The division of the material world according to the divine cosmos enabled a reciprocal engagement with that very space by either conforming to its divine topography or contesting and redefining its boundaries and thresholds through material practices. Returning to the question of how child identity and social relationships were created through mortuary space, I will therefore shift the focus from the theoretical and historical outline provided above to some concrete archaeological examples of medieval cemeteries. These serve to demonstrate first how the integration of age distributions with a detailed spatial analyses may serve as a methodological means to arrive at better informed suggestions for infants’ presumable baptismal status, and second to show how the consideration of medieval space can provide a framework for exploring local power relations in medieval society and the formation of child identity through the interaction of laypeople and clergy with the material world.

**Baptized and unbaptized infants in the archaeological record**

The three case studies discussed in this paper are all located in Central Europe and include infant burials dating between the later 12th and early 16th century AD – a period after the idea of Limbo had fully developed in Christian theology and the Church in Central Europe had started to introduce burial prohibitions for unbaptized children (see Introduction). The Swiss parish cemeteries of the Kirchlindach and Bleienbach villages were part of large-scale rescue excavations of the Archäologischer Dienst Bern in the 1970s and 1980s. In her thorough analysis of 22 cemeteries excavated during these interventions, S. Ulrich-Bochsler (1997) noted that in almost all cases spatial clusters of infant burials were salient but only few sites showed comparable spatial patterns of infant burial clusters. This observation caused Ulrich-Bochsler to vouch for the need to pay more attention to the detailed layouts of single burial grounds in order to acknowledge strongly localized practices even within small geographical regions.

The third case study, the infant cemetery of St Georg/Göttweig, Austria, was excavated by the University of Vienna (Hausmair, 2013) and represents a special type of burial ground exclusively for young children.
Infant burials in the medieval parish cemetery

Along two medieval predecessor buildings within the current, post-14th-century parish church of Kirchlindach, a total of 82 burials were discovered in the framework of rescue excavations. 61 of these graves can be dated to the Middle Ages (Eggenberger and Stöckli, 1983: 54). Most of the deceased were buried outside the medieval church, west-east oriented. Approximately 60 per cent of the individuals were of sub-adult age, including 15 neonates and infants who had died within one year after birth (Table 2) (Eggenberger and Stöckli, 1983; Ulrich-Bochsler, 1997: 185; unpublished data kindly provided by S. Ulrich-Bochsler). Adults and sub-adults categorized in age group *infans I - juvenile* (see Table 1 and 2) were spread across the entire burial space with no particular clustering, whereas neonates and infants were positioned primarily close to the medieval chancel of the 12th/13th- to 14th-century building (Figure 2(a)). A few newborn babies and infants were also discovered inside the chancel. Those, however, could also belong to the oldest medieval church dating from the 9th to 10th century, in which case they – again – would be placed directly attached to the outside of this building’s chancel. Furthermore it has to be noted that foetuses and perinates (premature and possible stillbirths) are not present in the entire sample. The body layout of the infant burials could be only recorded in four cases, but where observable the children were buried in supine position (Eggenberger and Stöckli, 1983: Fig. 48, 50). None of the burials contained grave goods.

At Bleienbach parish church – located only 30 km northeast of Kirchlindach – the medieval burial sample (c. 13th century-Reformation) is comprised of 31 individuals and shows a significantly different age distribution among the youngest individuals as well as a strongly differing spatial patterning (Figure 2(b)) (Eggenberger et al., 1994). Inside the medieval predecessor building of the current church, 20 burials of foetuses, perinates and a few neonates were discovered (Table 2), most of them clustering in the northwest corner of the nave. Many burials do not follow the usual west-east orientation and seem to have been placed in an arbitrary manner. Like in Kirchlindach, the children were buried without any grave goods, predominantly lying on their backs. Only one infant was found in a crouched, ‘sleep-like’ position (unpublished drawings kindly provided by Archäologischer Dienst Bern). Despite the poor preservation of the medieval cemetery outside the church, which was largely destroyed by later building and funerary activities, it is obvious from the almost exclusively young age of the intra-church burials that this sector was reserved for a very specific age group.

Comparing the spatial patterns in the two parish cemeteries with the theologically infused architecture of churches, both cases suggest a deep entanglement of infant burials and sacred space. The Kirchlindach neonates and infants are predominantly located close to the walls of the chancel. In previous and current research such burials have often been interpreted as graves of unbaptized children, their proximity to the sanctuary explained as the attempt of parents to challenge their children’s eternal damnation. Some scholars have argued for example that the church’s walls could have served as a means to prevent demons from harming and taking possession of the infants’ souls (e.g. Davidson, 2005: 35; Karkov, 2013:...
The burial directly beneath the church’s eaves is also often attributed to beliefs in a kind of post-mortem baptism provided by rain water dripping from the roof onto the small graves – hence the preferred designation of such burials as ‘eave’s-drip burials’ (in German ‘Traufbestattungen’) in archaeological literature (e.g. Craig-Atkins, 2014; Slivka, 1997; Weiβ, 2007). The latter interpretation in itself is problematic, since it is actually based on folk beliefs recorded in modern-period protestant communities in Germany and Switzerland and cannot be substantiated through any written evidence predating the 17th century (Schmitz-Esser, 2014: 488). It is also striking that foetuses and perinates – the age groups with the highest risk of dying without baptism (see Table 1) – are obviously missing in the Kirchlindach sample, just as they are often missing at comparable sites e.g. at Hettingen, Switzerland (Zücher et al., 1984: 245–246), Regny, France (Zadora-Rio and Galinié, 1996: 180) or Raunds Furnells, United Kingdom (Boddington, 1996: Tab. 7).

In Kirchlindach, it is not only the lack of prematurely born children which makes it in my opinion highly unlikely that the recorded burials represent unbaptized children. In addition to the infant burials seeming to be well integrated into the general pattern of the cemetery in terms of orientation, which suggests a rather systematic and supposedly authorized practice, the close proximity to the chancel and thus the altar – the axis mundi – situated them closer to the centre of the divine cosmos than any other person buried in the churchyard. As mentioned earlier, children who had died shortly after baptism were thought to directly enter Heaven or to at least dwell in Paradise, where they were closer to God than any other ordinary Christian. Considering the age and space patterns in Kirchlindach, it seems unlikely that a special need for protection or post-mortem baptism motivated the community to bury the babies directly next to the chancel. On the contrary, I would argue that the spatial situation suggests that the buried infants were indeed baptized. By securing one of the most prominent areas in the cemetery, that is the zone closest to the holy altar (axis mundi), people recreated the actual closeness these infants were supposed to have to God in the afterlife within the divine microcosm of the church, transcribing their souls’ post-mortem whereabouts into the material yet theologically structured space of the parish church.

The Bleienbach children are on the other hand of exclusively premature age – mostly foetuses and perinates (Table 2). The burials do not follow consistently the common west-east orientation and they are located inside the church, in the area of the laity next to the western entrance. This liminal space that materialized the border between Christianity and the outside world was also where the baptismal font was most likely located. Here, age pattern and burial location suggest that we are looking at illicit burials of unbaptized infants, or possibly children who had only received emergency baptism. Such burials would constitute the transgression of official regulations that prohibited burial of the unbaptized in consecrated ground as well as intra-church burial in general. The rather arbitrary orientation of the graves suggests that the interments were conducted without priestly supervision in a manner that was not very organised. Placing the infants in the liminal zone of the imago mundi may have been a spatial reference to their unfortunate place in the afterlife; an expression of doubt about the validity of emergency baptism; or possibly an attempt to protect the fragile souls from harmful spirits by including them in Christian space, yet without violating the threshold to the
sacred centre of the church-cosmos – the altar in the East. At the same time, burying the children close to the baptismal font would have brought the infants physically close to baptism, which could be read as an attempt to bestow the holy rite’s transformative powers on unbaptized children or to validate a questionable baptism even beyond death.

_Christian afterlife topography and infant burials in the medieval landscape_

According to Eliade (1959: 35, 44, 82), humans recreate the divine structure of the world on different scales in their material environment – in their homes, their immediate neighbourhood and the surrounding landscape. In the next section, I will therefore attend to the relationship between special burial grounds for infants and medieval landscape using the example of the infant cemetery of St Georg/Göttweig, Austria.

Located on the secluded southern hilltop of Mount Göttweig, the medieval church of St Georg used to be a subsidiary church of Göttweig Abbey between the 10th/11th and the early 16th century (Hausmair, in press). During the excavations of St George’s foundations, a burial ground dating between the 13th and early 16th century was discovered (Hausmair, 2013). The sheer presence of burials at St Georg is surprising, since there is not one record in the abbey’s rich archive which would indicate any burial privileges attached to the subsidiary church. Also the age composition of the sample is remarkable. Of the 37 recorded individuals only one is of adult age, while the rest of the sample is comprised of very young children: 12 who had died shortly after birth, the oldest one being an infant of 1 to 2 months, and 21 premature and possibly stillborn babies (Table 2, Figure 3). Where the body layout could be observed, the infants were mostly buried in supine position. Only in three cases children were lying on their sides in a sleep-like position. Although none of the burials contained grave goods, it is worth mentioning five plain, iron needles from burial contexts which may have served to fix some kind of shroud for wrapping the small bodies. Almost half of the infants were buried in a ditch that accompanied the southern side of the chancel. Here, several of the older burials were severely disturbed by later ones (Hausmair, 2013, in press). Together with a large amount of scattered fragments deriving from a non-determinable number of infant skeletons this context suggests that infant burial at St Georg was not a short-term occurrence but persisted over a longer period of time.

The age pattern and location of the cemetery next to a subsidiary church without burial privileges strongly supports an interpretation of this site as a burial ground for the illicit burial of unbaptized children (Hausmair, in press). If the children had been baptized, they would have been buried in one of the four medieval parish cemeteries in the surrounding area. Though what makes this specific case even more relevant, is the topographic setting of the church within the local landscape, which seems to have played a major role in the presumably unauthorized burial practice. Mount Göttweig dominates the local landscape. Its southern plateau is visible from kilometres away, making St Georg church an important feature of the medieval landscape and, as a sanctuary, an omnipresent signifier of God’s power for local people.
Jacques Le Goff (1990: 194, 207–208) has pointed out that in addition to medieval afterlife itself being heavily determined by spatial segregation, prominent topographic features in the landscape embodied physical hubs that connected the world of the living with the realms of the dead. By employing verbal and visual means, concrete images of the world’s structure were delivered to the largely illiterate lay population through e.g. sermons, didactical poems, plays or visual art in churches and on religious objects (Park, 2010: 20). This impressive array of communication techniques ‘exercised a suggestive power over the minds and senses of the viewers [and listeners]’ (Götter, 2010: 81) that directly connected afterlife topography and its various places to the landscape of the living. I will demonstrate this more precisely on the example of the 15th-century ‘Coronation of the Virgin’ by French artist Enguerrand Quarton (Figure 4) which depicts scenes of the Last Judgment. The Doom was a very common theme in medieval visual art of Central European churches, and thus familiar to everyone attending mass or any other gathering at the church (Wegmann, 2003). Due to the iconoclasm of the Reformation only few examples have survived though until today. In Quarton’s painting the Virgin is floating on a cloud above the atmospheric sky, surrounded by the Holy Trinity, angels, saints and possibly the Holy Innocents (the little praying children at the lower verge of Heaven). On Earth’s surface the crucifixion is taking place on Golgotha – a dominant feature in the landscape. The cross and hill build the central axis (axis mundi) of the painting, connecting Earth with Heaven and indicating the spatial separation of Purgatory, Hell and Limbo, which are located beneath the terrestrial surface. By employing contemporary architectural and natural features and explicitly defining the locations of the various places of the afterlife within the physical environment, such influential transmitters of theological knowledge entrenched the realms of the afterlife in the material world, which people could relate to in their immediate surroundings.

Returning to the Göttweig site, one could argue that the considerable distance between St Georg, the villages in the valley, and the abbey on the mountain’s northern plateau spatially separated the children from the Christian community and thus evidences the acknowledgment of burial directives. However, I propose an alternative reading of the secluded yet highly visible position of St Georg within the medieval imago mundi. A viewshe-analysis of the local area examining the lines-of-sight between St Georg and its contemporary villages in a 5 km radius reveals that 16 of the 27 medieval settlements had a direct view of the subsidiary church, as did the abbey on the hill’s northern plateau (Figure 5). From a further six villages it took less than a 500 m walk to be able to see the sanctuary. Dominating the local landscape and more visible than any other church in the vicinity, St Georg thus was an omnipresent pillar in people’s lives that allowed them to experience the connection between Heaven and Earth as they went about their daily tasks. I would argue that burying the babies in a place that in the medieval worldview was closer to Heaven than it was to Limbo, almost touching the sky when viewed from below, was a deliberate act. It is very likely that placing the children close to the sky aimed to distance them physically from the afterlife place the Church had referred them to. St Georg may have been understood by medieval locals as a material connection to Heaven, a divine axis which they could call upon for support. The remarkable inter-visibility of St George and the villages serves as a good example that not only the
placing of the dead inside the cemetery may have constructed their status within the community, but also the larger local landscape was signified through spatial structuring that was closely linked to visual perception and the appreciation of God’s creation and its manifestation in the material world.

Although the situation at Göttweig remains a rare occurrence until date, there are other comparable sites known in Austria. E.g. recent excavations of a subsidiary church of the Haselbach parish located on Michelberg hill, c. 50 km northeast of Mount Göttweig, revealed ‘a large number’ (Lauermann et al., 2014: 19) of infant burials. Research is still on-going, but preliminary results suggest that the burials date to the (late) medieval period. The topographic situation in this case strikingly resembles the one at Göttweig. The church’s hilltop-position is visible from most villages located in the plain surrounding the hill. On clear days it is even possible to see as far as Vienna, which is located approximately 25 km southeast of Michelberg.

Both cemeteries were unexpected discoveries in the framework of research excavations, which may be a reason why only few sites of this character are known in the region. Usually, medieval churches and cemeteries in Austria – as well as Switzerland – are only excavated in the framework of rescue interventions. Such interventions usually occur in parish churches that are still used today and are located in settled areas. Churches that were abandoned and are located away from populated areas are rarely the focus of archaeological excavations. There is thus a good chance that future research at sites comparable to Göttweig and Michelberg may reveal similar situations as the ones discussed. Either way, these examples should provide motivation for an intensified discussion about the meaning of medieval burial places in a wider landscape-context that expands the view from the common intra-cemetery or village-context to a larger scale.

Reconsidering social dimensions: early-infancy death and lay agency

As demonstrated above, employing medieval notions of divine space proves a useful tool to achieve a more informed interpretation of the possible baptismal status of buried individuals. It clearly shows that, despite the general commonality of distinct burial clusters of very young children, the presented cemeteries actually exhibit very different patterns of burial spacing and age distribution, attesting to the differing ways people dealt with their deceased infants in these localities. In the last section of this paper, I aim to put these observations in context with the broader social dynamics between Church and local communities.

Clerical power, space and local rootedness

The earliest infant burials from the three presented cemeteries date from around the later 12th/13th century and therefore were erected after Limbo and the spatial differentiation of the afterlife had fully unfolded in theological discourse and first burial prohibitions had been introduced. Hence, all these inhumations were conducted by communities who shared a similar, yet not uniform, vision of the divine cosmos and were familiar with the general position of the Church on these matters. Nevertheless the burial practices vary considerably.
These variations could be explained with differing attitudes towards early-infancy death and a locally rooted understanding of the world, which certainly touches to some extent on medieval reality. It is however necessary to think about the local conditions allowing such vernacular practices to evolve.

Although declining in influence since the 14th century, the Roman Church in Central Europe constituted the most powerful regulator of social order in the Middle Ages. Its exercise of power was not uniform though, often not even within the same region. In addition to changes in ecclesiastic viewpoints themselves (e.g. spatial restructuring of the afterlife or introduction of burial directives in the 12th and 13th centuries), the reinforcement of church doctrine and adherence to ecclesiastic directives was hierarchically structured. The very deliverance of theological knowledge was conducted by local clergies, who themselves were in most cases not involved in any decision-making processes at the top level of church hierarchy. Yet they were the ones directly communicating with laypeople (Moeller, 2008). The possibilities of how to deal with deceased infants were thus strongly dependent on the attitudes of local priests. It may have made an enormous difference whether priests led an authoritarian regime in their parish, forcefully imposing doctrine and punishing noncompliance; were ignorant of the official requirements; indifferent or maybe even critical of official teachings.

In Kirchlindach, burial of presumably baptized children next to the chancel supposedly recreated afterlife topography and the children’s position therein. Reversely, it seems to have excluded unbaptized children from consecrated ground. It is possible that Kirchlindach’s people themselves felt convinced by official teachings. Fearing the pollution of their cemetery by the unbaptized, perhaps they accepted the post-mortem segregation the Church insisted on and complied with burial regulations. On the other hand, it also could have been a strict local clergy who insisted on adherence to official rules, vigilantly monitoring what was going on in the graveyard and obstructing any attempts of alternative burial treatment, regardless of laypeople’s personal attitudes or sentiments. Here, the cosmic structure of the parish cemetery supposedly became an arena where churchmen could reinforce their power.

The Bleienbach and Göttweig examples, however, point towards a space where established order and eschatology could be bent – maybe even contested or renegotiated. Burying the presumably unbaptized or emergency-baptized children inside the church certainly did not go unnoticed by the Bleienbach clergy. The repeated opening of intra-church ground and possibly also the scent of decay elevating from the small graves was perceivable for anyone entering the church on a regular basis. In this case, we have to assume that either the local priests were involved in this practice themselves, or they tolerated it, indicating at least empathy for the difficult situation of families and children as well as possibly the priests’ own deep trust in the protective and transformative powers of the church’s sacred topography. In Göttweig, it could even be suggested that local families disagreed with church teachings and – although possibly having to obey the prohibition of burying their children in the parish cemetery – took matters into their own hands. Appropriating the secluded yet highly visible church as their infants’ resting place suggests a subversion of ecclesiastic directives. Instead, people seem to have employed St Georg’s powerful position in the sacred topography to
vouch for their children. Even if local priests were aware of the practice, this transformation of the local *axis mundi* into an advocate for the unbaptized would have been a powerful statement of laypeople: disagreement, if not rejection of theological teachings and a demand for having a say in the fate of their unfortunate offspring.

What becomes clear is the strong local rootedness of these practices. Bleienbach is located only c. 30 km away from Kirchlindach, and yet burials of infants were conducted in an entirely different manner. As the chronology cannot be narrowed down for any of the discussed sites due to a lack of radiocarbon dates it is difficult to assess whether these differences may result from temporal developments in the later Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the fact that an inclusion of unbaptized infants seems to have never occurred in Kirchlindach while in Bleienbach it presumably did, attests to locally anchored practices and a large variety in the possibilities of local communities to engage with their deceased infants. It is however difficult to determine whether the resistance against church regulations, which seems to be the case in Bleienbach and Göttweig, was motivated by parental sentiments over a lost child or by the fear of the unbaptized’s restless spirits.

**Deceased infants: ‘Fearful objects’ or members of the community?**

R. Gilchrist (2012) has pointed out that the marginalization of unbaptized children through theological teachings and burial regulation not only disadvantaged but de-humanized such infants. It turned them into liminal creatures burdened with Original Sin and fearful objects that might return to haunt the living. Their bodies and souls thus constituted potential pollutants for the entire churchyard, capable even of harming the living. Such fears extended into folk beliefs (Gilchrist, 2012: 209). However, as Gilchrist also has shown for the English Middle Ages, archaeological evidence suggests a strong ambivalence in the attitude of laypeople towards early-infancy death. E.g. domestic burials of infants point toward a careful treatment of the youngest and an inclusion into the very home of families. Gilchrist emphasizes that such examples could be read as manifestations of strong parental feelings towards the unfortunate baby and practices that aimed to protect it despite the lack of baptism. On the other hand such burials could also indicate the perception of the infant corpse as magical object which possessed the power to protect the family from future misfortunate births or enhance fertility (Gilchrist, 2012: 221–222). The latter suggestion may be also worth considering in regard to domestic burials of newborns in ceramic vessels that (infrequently) occur in northern Germany, Poland and Slovakia (Gardela and Duma, 2013). Gilchrist (2008) also points to the proportionally large number of sub-adult burials in medieval England that contained objects of apotropaic character, such as beads or amulets. This situation may very well suggest a special care and intention to protect society’s youngest (Gilchrist, 2008: 152). It has to be noted though that such objects seem to only rarely occur in graves of possible stillbirths or newborns.

While in the regions discussed in this paper neither domestic burial nor supposedly magical objects as grave goods are evidenced in the archaeological record, the presented sites reflect a range of attitudes among the lay population that seem to not have been purely driven by fear of the unbaptized. They also indicate a sincere concern for infants’ well-being in the afterlife,
possibly even emotional struggle over the loss of a child. In a way, these attitudes, which might at first appear to be conflicting, are two sides of the same coin: solicitude over the babies’ fates.

The distance between the Göttweig infant cemetery and local parish cemeteries or the placement of the Bleienbach infants in a liminal zone of the parish church, may express such ambivalences. Although the tiny corpses were buried in an area clearly demarcated from the graves of ‘true believers’, their physical inclusion in positively connoted spaces within the cosmic structure prevails over notions of exclusion and segregation in both cases. Particularly in Göttweig, the omnipresent view of St Georg from the villages in the valley may have acted as a constant reminder of the infants buried next to the church and a material signifier for the desired rescue of the unfortunate souls. Such contexts could suggest that laypeople hoped for the protective powers of these spaces to guard the unbaptized, but maybe also to restrain them from returning. More importantly, the situation also indicates that families conceived of their unbaptized children as belonging to their community, and, if not as fully integrated members, then at least as human beings with a potential to integrate into Christianity even beyond death.

**Conclusions**

Medieval space was a powerful entity, heavily regulated and claimed by church scholars, who used it to impose theological desires and political agendas on laypeople. Yet its materiality enabled even the most ordinary and uneducated person to directly interact with the cosmos and thus participate in the construction, maintenance, and also remodelling of the social fabric through its spatial dimension. It is space-in-the-making we encounter in the practices traceable in the archaeological record.

The diversity observed in the three presented case studies demonstrates that despite the theologically heavily regulated structure of the cosmos and the Church’s prerogative over defining the conditions for everybody’s place within it, the parish church and local landscape were not understood as static containers. People perceived these spaces as flexible entities that provided a direct local link to post-mortem spheres, for which the bodies of the deceased children were key to connect to. Predominantly, such practices impacted on the lives and social relationships within a small geographic region. The case studies primarily shed light on local responses to early-infancy death. Attitudes towards the early deceased seem to have been quite varied, with Kirchlindach people probably perceiving their children’s post-mortem fate rather unalterable, while in Bleienbach and Göttweig the archaeological patterns suggest a more flexible understanding of the afterlife and the position of infants therein.

The conclusions reached from the analyses primarily demonstrate the agency of laypeople in specific local settings. However, as S. Ulrich-Bochsler’s (1997) large-scale analysis of parish cemeteries in the Bern region (including Kirchlindach and Bleienbach) suggests, such local practices do not constitute exceptional occurrences, but seem to have been rather the rule in the later Middle Ages of Central Europe.

By burying children in what local actors considered a preferential place within the *imago mundi*, infants’ post-mortem fate was actively constructed. But these local actions had more
far reaching consequences. Presumably unconsciously, laypeople’s interaction with the sacred space they lived in initiated the deconstruction of space as prescribed by medieval theology, transgressing the thresholds of eschatology and redefining its boundaries. This engagement with the divine world did not simply reproduce the cosmic structure but gradually altered it. Thus, we need to ask to what extent such varied local practices may have contributed to a more profound change in medieval power structures. In what ways did they fuel reformatory tendencies, which eventually emerged through the articulation of critical scholars as well as resistant laypeople in the course of the Reformation (Moeller, 2008)? At the fringes of modernity, upcoming protestant movements built a large part of their reformatory aspirations on the contestation of medieval Catholic eschatology, especially the concreteness of afterlife topographies and their physical connection to Earth, including the condemnation of unbaptized children to Limbo (Herzog, 2006: 120, 127). While historical sources reflect these contestations predominantly through the writings of educated men like Luther or Calvin, the patterns we can observe through detailed analysis of the archaeological record offer the potential to better understand the role laypeople of ordinary backgrounds may have played in these developments.

The detailed study of individual sites is therefore central for progressing in our exploration of both medieval attitudes towards death in early infancy and negotiation processes between laity and clergy. Of course such an approach cannot replace larger comparisons of medieval sites. But exploring local phenomena is a prerequisite to enable comparisons on a larger scale and beyond regional boundaries in order to avoid over-generalization and yet contribute to a broader discussions on medieval popular beliefs, practices and their influence on long-term developments.

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References


Figure 1. Schema of the medieval church’s spatial organization (image: B. Hausmair).
Figure 2. Age distribution in the cemeteries of (a) Kirchlindach and (b) Bleienbach, Switzerland (images: B. Hausmair; background drawings: © Archäologischer Dienst Bern).
Figure 3. Age distribution in the infant cemetery of St Georg, Göttweig, Austria (image: B. Hausmair).
Figure 4. Enguerrand Quarton’s ‘Coronation of the Virgin’, France, 1454. The Limbo of Infants is depicted on the far bottom left as a shut-off cave (image: Directmedia Publishing, 2002).
Figure 5. Digital terrain model (10x10 m raster) showing (a) the topographical situation and medieval settlements around Mount Göttweig, Austria, and (b) lines-of-sight between St Georg, Göttweig Abbey and medieval settlements. Assumed height for St Georg (target): 4 m; for observer-points: 1,7 m; 2 pixels margin for adapting to the highest point surrounding each observer/target-point (image: B. Hausmair; background tiles courtesy of Land Kärnten/data.organsiation.gv.at).

Table 1. Baptism and biological age.

<table>
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<th>possible emergency baptism</th>
<th>baptism in church</th>
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<tr>
<td>quickening of feuts</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;ensoulment&quot;</td>
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<td>lunar months</td>
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BIRTH
human remains with highest probability of incorporating unbaptized children
Table 2. Age distribution in the cemeteries of Kirchlindach (Eggenberger and Stöckli, 1983; unpublished data kindly provided by S. Ulrich-Bochsler/University of Bern), Bleienbach (Eggenberger et al., 1994) and St Georg/Göttweig (unpublished data kindly provided by K. Wimmer/NHM Wien).

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