Methodology – the Database. Alex Marchbank. Updated 12.12.17

Analytical Tools

Having selected two market towns for comparison, it was necessary to find some way of adequately sorting through the testators in order to compare their wills. Some historians working with wills have rightly questioned the value of purely quantitative approaches, arguing that looking purely at the statistics derived from these documents obscures much of the creativity which testators could exercise.[[1]](#footnote-1) Others have noted the more general limitations of a statistical approach, namely that although it may be possible to identify trends in the data, there will always be some wills and testaments which do not conform.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given that this study is concerned with expression of individual identities it has been necessary to adopt an approach which is able to take into account minor variations and individualistic expressions. For these reasons, this study employs a methodology which combines quantitative and qualitative research, looking both at general patterns as well as looking closely at specific individuals and case-studies. The relatively small sample size of ? testators has made it possible to become fairly well acquainted with the individual wills.

Analysis of the wills has been possible using Microsoft Excel. A list of all the testators for each location was compiled from the online catalogues of the relevant archives (NROCAT and Canterbury Cathedral). The wills were consulted on microfilm, and burial details for each testator were recorded next to each entry. With regard to the burial clause, all elements of the clause were recorded in separate, consecutive fields. These include the words introducing the burial clause, usually along the lines of ‘my body to be buried’. The next field recorded the location of the burial, as found in the will, and further fields allowed additional information to be captured. Each entry was typed into the database as it was found written in the will, so decisions could later on be made about whether spellings and punctuation would be standardised. The division of the burial clause in this way means that it is much easier to search and filter the testators into different groups for analysis. By preserving the word order of the burial clause it is also possible to reconstruct it accurately in order to quote it.

The analytical tools available in Microsoft Excel have meant that it is possible to filter testators by gender, once an additional ‘gender’ field was created to record this information next to each testator. It has also been possible to filter by the type of burial clause, language (Latin or English) and date. This means that analysis is possible across many different categories – for example comparing whether testators are more likely to give a detailed description of their burial location in English or in Latin.

Categories have also been created for more efficient sorting of testators. The fields are as follows:

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| **Name of field** | **Desciption** |
| Location | The rough area in which a testator wishes to be buried (e.g. church, churchyard, monastic house) |
| Parish | Which parish a testator wishes to be buried in |
| Description Type | The amount of description a testator gives in their burial clause |
| Specific Location | The particular area in which a testator wishes to be buried (if given) |
| Type | Whether a testator navigates their burial location by geographical marker, by naming a particular individual, or some combination of the two |
| Body | This field records whether testators make reference to the body or gravestone of another individual. |

The first three categories are completed for all testators, and it is only those testators who give more detail about their burial location who have the final three fields completed. It is necessary to say some more about the final three fields of ‘description type’, ‘specific location’ and ‘body’ at this point.

‘Description Type’ refers to the amount of detail accorded by a testator to their burial location. ‘Simple descriptions’ are the most common category [345] and correspond to the smallest amount of information which can be given about a testator’s burial location. Such descriptions are usually in the form ‘my body to be buried in the churchyard of [location]’. ‘Combined descriptions’ represent the second most common description type, with 126 testators giving this level of information. These kinds of descriptions combine the general burial location with some other information about the space in which they wish to be buried. This could be the grave or body of another individual, a geographical marker such as a particular chapel or compass point, or a reference to a specific image. A final category, ‘multiple descriptions’ cover testators who give still further information, often combining geographical markers with information about a particular individual’s grave. This is exemplified in the will of Margaret Gebon of Faversham, who requests burial ‘in the chapel of the south side of the church yard of the church of Our Lady of Faversham beside my father’.[[3]](#footnote-3) By categorising the burial clauses in this way it becomes easier to use Excel’s ‘filter’ function to identify which testators give the most and the least detail about their burial space, as well as opening up the possibility of combining this information with other categories. It is possible then to compare the amount of detail accorded by those who request burial in a churchyard against the amount given by those buried in a monastic house, for example.

The ‘specific location’ category gives information about the description given by the testator to their burial spot. Forty-three labels within this field testify to the range and creativity with which medieval will-makers described the spaces around them. The descriptions range from compass points, to named altars, chapels and crosses, parts of the church including porches and aisles, references to wives or executors appointing the burial location, as well as a range of family members near to whom testators could be interred. Categorising in this way allows the data to be sorted by description regardless of which market town the testator is from. This enables us to see how common requests of burial next to family are (for example) in Thetford and Faversham respectively.

The ‘body’ field records information for those testators who request burial near to another individual, and the way in which they describe that person’s location in the ground. Some testators, for example, refer to the body of the individual buried in that place, as John Love does in 1517: ‘my body to be buried in the church yard of our blessed lady of the parish church of Faversham beside the body of my wife there’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Other testators note the grave or the burial of the individual near to whom they wish to be interred: ‘my body to be buried in the church yard of Saint Peter of Thetford by the sepulture of my husband’.[[5]](#footnote-5) These descriptions are interesting because of what they tell us about how testators understood spaces, and also how they believed that other people understood those same spaces. These descriptions may also give valuable insights into the relationships between themselves and the people next to whom they wished to be buried. There is also likely a temporal element at play as well and it will be interesting to, where possible, look more closely at the time difference between the burials, and how this might change the description of the space. It should also be noted that in three cases testators request burial in the ‘body’ of the church, and this is also noted in this category.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Whilst this study is largely concerned with the burial clause, most often found at the beginning of the will just after the preamble, some testators do make mention of gravestones, burial shrouds and other items or processes associated with their burials. As such, it has been necessary to read through all of the wills which form part of this study to ascertain whether additional provision was made later on in the document. Any such further information was noted in an additional column next to the testator’s record.

1. Elisabeth Salter, *Cultural Creativity in the Early English Renaissance* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Weetman, ‘Testamentary Piety and Charity in London, 1259-1370’ (University of Oxford, 2003), p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. PRC/17/12/126b. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. PRC/17/13/380b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ANW, will register, Randes, fo. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. PRC/17/12/247b, PRC/17/5/73, PRC/17/15/266b [↑](#footnote-ref-6)