Physically and spiritually, the dead were a constant presence in
medieval society. Medieval Christians dwelt in a community of the
living and the dead: the traditional Christian funeral summed up this
close relationship by bringing the body of the deceased to rest in a con-
secrated churchyard at the centre of a village or town while the clergy
offered prayers and masses for the soul of the deceased. The burial of
the dead in the midst of the living was one of the most important
aspects of the presence of the dead in medieval society.

The history of burial in the West has unfolded in three long phases.
Evidence from archaeology, the Bible and Roman law shows that in the
ancient world burial (when chosen over cremation) took place outside
the city or settlement. This was also true among the Germanic tribes
and in early Christianity: the Theodosian Code (mid-fifth century) and
the teachings of the Greek Father John Chrysostom (d. 407) prohibited
burial within towns. The ascent of Christianity within the Roman
Empire allowed Christians to choose burial ad sanctos, near the shrines
of martyrs. These first basilica were extramural, but by the fifth century
the shrines were located within city walls. The first of the dead to
‘reside’ among the living were the saints; the ordinary Christian dead
quickly followed as urban churchyard burial was established in the
following centuries.1 The result was the practice of burial in varying
proximity to the altars or relics of a church: for most, burial in the
churchyard, for the holy or privileged, burial in the church itself.
Churchyard burial was established in Germany with the introduction
of Christianity and came to central Germany, including Saxony and
Brandenburg, beginning in the eleventh century.2

This chapter examines the physical removal of the dead from the
world of the living. In the Empire, this process began in the late
fifteenth century. Contemporaries began to complain of crowded and indeed overfilled urban churchyards resulting, in some areas, from rapid urban population growth combined with high mortality. The urban churchyards could not be expanded, and the stench which arose from these crowded places of burial was increasingly considered a threat to public health. For hygiene reasons, many densely populated German cities and towns closed their urban churchyards and established new cemeteries outside city walls, separated from the sacred locus of the parish church. Extramural burial initially evoked some limited protest, but with the Reformation supporters of the traditional Church were quick to see a connection between the physical marginalization of the bodies of the dead inherent in extramural burial and the denial of intercession for the souls of the dead which was central to Protestant doctrine. This parallel separation of the souls and bodies of the dead from the world of the living was an essential cultural precondition of the German Reformation as well as one of its most profound consequences.

Scholars have long been aware of the cultural significance of the shift from pagan extramural burial to Christian burial in or near a church located at the centre of a town or village. The corresponding shift from churchyard burial back to extramural burial, which began in Germany in the late fifteenth century, has received far less attention, and its social and cultural implications are largely unexplored. This chapter examines the rise of extramural burial through an especially revealing conflict that unfolded when the Catholic Duke George of Saxony attempted to establish extramural burial in Leipzig in 1536. The Leipzig burial controversy illustrates the social, intellectual and cultural forces that separated the living from their dead before and during the Reformation.

The Rise of Extramural Burial in Sixteenth-century Germany

In medieval Europe, the first major disruption of intramural churchyard burial came in the mid-fourteenth century with the catastrophe of the Black Death, which led to the establishment of temporary cemeteries and burial places outside city walls. But with a few exceptions, these emergency cemeteries were not permanent. The real shift to extramural burial began in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when cities and towns began to close their main churchyards permanently and establish or expand cemeteries outside the city. Examples are documented from many German cities including Freiburg/Breisgau (1514),