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"Social status and disease: diagnosis and cause of death information in Georgian London"

It is usually extremely difficult to analyze the relationships that may have existed between social status and mortality in the early modern period. This is partly because cause of death classification is often problematic and because age information is given only rarely. It is also unusual for reliable information on the social status of those dying to be recorded consistently. It is even more unusual for data on the local environment to be available. It is almost unheard for information on age, cause of death and the local environment to be available in one source. Those looking at the relationships between mortality and social status, therefore, either focus on particularly well-recorded groups - such as members of the aristocracy, monks or lawyers - or seek to exploit status information linked to existing family reconstitution data.

This paper presents some preliminary findings based on a source that provides unparalleled information on the relationship between social status, the environment and cause of death. The Sexton's burial books of St Martin's in the Fields, Westminster, provide data on the age, residence, cause of death and burial fee of all those dying in the parish between 1747 and 1824. The paper argues that cost of burial is a reasonably good status indicator. It suggests that, in London, diagnosis and ascribed cause of death might sometimes (but by no means always) be affected profoundly by the social status of the deceased. The paper concludes by pointing out the complexity of the mechanisms involved in disease transmission and the relative difficulty of isolating any particular variable.