Tombs are meant to receive dead bodies, but not all bodies residing in them are necessarily dead. Human beings are occasionally buried alive for punishment, as was the Roman custom with transgressing vestal virgins, or even by mistake, as was popularised by the Greek novels Chaereas and Calliroe and An Ephesian Tale. Fugitives, runaways, desperate homeless or outcasts might also seek refuge in graveyards. Such cases, also popularised by the novel A Babylonian Story, must have been widespread in the Mediterranean world, as the Psalmist seems to imply (Ps 67:7 LXX). According to the Gospels, a tomb was likely to become the only available shelter for a destitute demented person (Mark 5:3). It was, however, mainly Christian ascetics, men and women, who, starting from the late third century, chose to live inside burial places abandoning families and regular homes on their own accord and without any apparent necessity. Most of them were inhabitants of Egypt, both natives and Greeks, but imitators are known from other provinces of the Roman Empire as well.¹ By the late sixth century, many Christians in Egypt had settled permanently in ancient necropoleis, transforming them into monasteries.²

Christian ascetics who chose to live in tombs wished to cut off themselves from the civilised world and to be forgotten by relatives and friends.³ But they did not lead a life of total isolation. They had to make arrangements for regular provisions, while their habitation was occasionally widely known and frequented by visitors. Their behaviour was admired by many of their contemporaries and praised by biographers. Nevertheless,

¹ For Syria see Theodoret, Religious History 12.2. For other examples, see below.
³ Although the literary evidence tends to report mostly extreme forms of exercise, the great majority of monks in fourth and fifth century Egypt tended to live in monasteries within the inhabitant zones, often transforming deserted villages into ascetic places of habitation. See James E. Goehring, “Withdrawn from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt,” HTR 89/3 (1996): 267–85.
they all had to spend long hours, day after day and month after month, sometimes for many years, meditating and praying unceasingly without any human comfort or contact.\(^4\)

Such practices have normally been considered as extreme examples of Christian self-discipline. Since the mortification of the body in the hope of obtaining angelic substance while still upon earth was the declared aim of all monks, the idea of self-burial appears almost as self-evident and, consequently, has not attracted special attention. Asked why he treated his body so harshly, an early Christian ascetic replied: “I am killing it because it is killing me.”\(^5\)

Living in graves must have served other purposes as well, reminding recluses of their mortal nature. “Shut yourself in a tomb,” one of the desert fathers is reported to have advised his fellow-monks, “as though you were already dead, so that at all times you will think death is near.”\(^6\) It is furthermore conceivable that hermits who inhabited cemeteries had in mind Jesus’ promise regarding the resurrection. As they had all read in the Gospel, the hour was approaching when the dead would hear the voice of the Son of God. Residents of graves were expected to hear it first and lead the way (John 5:25–8; cf. 1 Thess 4:15–7). It was thus easy to draw the conclusion that tombs were really privileged locations, making their inhabitants more perceptive than others. It was after all by Jesus’ sepulchre that the pious women were encouraged by an angel to abandon all fear (Matt 28:1–5).\(^7\)

Further connotations were also available. No early Christian could forget that an empty tomb had served as proof of the resurrection. Significantly, a story circulating about Simon, the so-called Magus, clearly associated temporal burial with claims to immortality. To prove his divine nature, Simon was said to have asked his disciples to bury him alive. Unfortunately his expectation to rise upon the third day failed, as the story goes, for he was not the Christ.\(^8\) Some courageous Christians were evidently hoping to


