Defining the place of burial: what makes a cemetery a cemetery?

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ABSTRACT A great deal of material has been written about cemeteries based on the assumption that they constitute a specific type of burial place, but few writers have given close attention to the task of describing the features that may be particular to cemeteries. This paper regards cemeteries as specifically demarcated sites of burial, with an ordered internal layout that is conducive both to families claiming control over their grave spaces, and to the conducting of what might be deemed by the community as appropriate funerary ritual. Cemetery space can be regarded as sacred, in that it acts as a focus for the pilgrimage of friends and family and is protected from activities deemed ‘disrespectful’. However, cemeteries are principally secular spaces: ownership is almost always by municipal authorities or private sector concerns. The sites are intended to serve the whole community, and in doing so are closely integrated into community history. The sites are able to carry multiple social and political meanings. Using these elements of definition—physical characteristics, ownership and purpose, sacredness and the site’s ability to promote or protect the individuality of the deceased—the paper characterizes churchyards, burial grounds, mass graves, war cemeteries and pantheons.

Introduction

Although there is a substantial literature that rests on the implicit assumption that cemeteries constitute a specific burial form, no study has yet attempted a detailed definition of the basic essentials of that form. A language of different burial space types needs to be set, establishing a common grammar for international, comparative and multidisciplinary studies. The use of such a grammar introduces a level of analysis that might otherwise be overlooked, and raises the possibility of more widespread and structured debate about burial space and its meanings. It is acknowledged that, in practice, burial space is essentially mutable: its meaning does not remain static over time; and its significance is not uniform over all cultures. Even at a basic level, the significance of such space alters as time accrues between the living and the dead. Furthermore, individual burial sites often do not present a single landscape: some may contain separate sections with distinctive meanings and purposes.

Comparative analysis clarifies distinctions, and opens up what may become
fruitful avenues for research. This paper will propose definitions of cemeteries, churchyards, burial grounds, mass graves, war cemeteries and pantheons. All these types of burial space are sufficiently well discussed in secondary literature to allow informed comment to take place. The list is not a comprehensive one: limited space excludes the possibility of extending the discussion to intramural burial and interment in mausolea. Much of the following debate will draw on secondary literature relating to burial sites in the modern period (c.1760–present), and will include reference to developments in the USA, Australia and Europe. The paper will draw on material from a number of disciplines, including history, historical archaeology, geography, sociology and social policy. A discussion will take place of each type of burial space according to a number of key characteristics, which are grouped under four broad headings: physical characteristics, ownership and purpose, sacredness, and the ability of the site to celebrate or protect the individuality of the deceased.

**Defining cemeteries**

J. S. Curl is one of the few writers to have ventured into the task of defining different types of burial space. He defines a cemetery as a “burial ground, especially a large landscaped park or ground laid out expressly for the deposition or interment of the dead, not being a churchyard attached to a place of worship” (Curl, 1999). Kolbuszewski takes a broader approach in his discussion of the cemetery as a text of culture, proposing the view that not every place of burial is a cemetery. He noted that one consequence of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the former Yugoslavia was the creation of a number of mass graves. These graves were simply a place of disposal, where corpses could ‘disappear’. He contrasts these burial sites with the cemetery, which he describes as:

> a certain sector of space delimited by certain a priori formulated resolutions, according to which it is there that funeral practices consistent with religious, ethnic, cultural (that is customary) and other easily defined needs of a given community, will be carried out (Kolbuszewski, 1995: 17).

Thus for Kolbuszewski, the cemetery carries two necessary interconnected requirements: “a priori formulated resolutions”, and the ability of the space to facilitate burial “carried out in an appropriately ritualised way” (1995: 18). Thus the cemetery becomes more than an *ad hoc* site in which the disposal of human remains has taken place: its purpose as a site of burial has been formally defined. Furthermore, the site has been so constituted that ritual—customary religious, ethnic and cultural funeral practices—can be readily accommodated.

Both Curl and Kolbuszewski’s analyses are useful but it is clear that the task of definition can be extended to include other, critical, factors and other types of burial space. For example, Curl notes just one feature that makes cemeteries different from churchyards, but there are many others: churchyards are often small tracts of burial land owned by and located close to the Church and used over centuries, while cemeteries—often larger in scale and predominantly owned
by secular authorities—have been in common use only since the 19th century. Distinctions can also be made between ordinary civic cemeteries and war cemeteries: although both are generally owned by secular authorities and can be similar in scale, war cemeteries are evidently reserved for those who died as a consequence of conflict, which also sets their chronological pattern of establishment and their role in fixing new expressions of national identity. Thus, ownership and purpose become further factors in the task of defining more exactly the nature both of cemeteries and of other locales for burial. For Meyer, another feature has more importance: cemeteries contain gravemarkers “that describe characteristics of a deceased person’s life and dates of birth and death” (Meyer, 1997). Thus the site carries the purpose of enshrining the identity of the deceased as an individual. Additional features can also usefully be brought into consideration, which can be ranged under two broad headings: other physical features of the site, such as boundary and internal layout; and the site’s ‘sacredness’, which may be defined in religious terms but can also include an assessment of pilgrimage to the site, its permanence, and its ability to act as a context for grief. The way in which all these elements are defined will become evident in the course of the following discussion.

**Cemeteries**

For the purposes of this text, cemeteries are defined by their having a number of distinctive characteristics, the first of which is particular physical features. Perhaps the most marked of these is location. Cemeteries are generally located close to but not necessarily within settlements. When cemeteries were first introduced in number in the second half of the 18th and first half of the 19th century, many were laid out perhaps half a mile away from the more populous areas of town. This trend reflected a conscious attempt to relocate the corpse—which by the 18th century was increasingly deemed to be a danger to public health—from inner-city churchyards to a site at the edge of town. This location also meant that cemeteries could be substantial in size—far larger than the overcrowded churchyards. Many cemeteries were in excess of 10–15 acres, and were able to expand as required. For example, York Cemetery (UK) was initially established on a 13 acre site, but over time grew to cover just over 25 acres (Murray, 1991). In both the USA and Australia cemeteries of 50 acres and larger are common. It should be noted that many of the older sites have now been overtaken by urban sprawl, as in London (Mellor, 1981).

As well as location, cemeteries have a number of other obvious physical properties. The most immediate of these is an established perimeter. In some instances, the boundary is marked by a hedge or other planting. Commonly, a more substantial structure is used: either a high wall or railings, or a combination of the two. The boundary structure is by no means an incidental feature of the site. Mount Auburn Cemetery, established in 1831 near Boston, MA initially had a boundary fence of wooden pales. The fence was quickly replaced with a 10 foot high railing, the base of which alone cost $15,000—three times
more than the sum allocated to the building of the chapel (Linden-Ward, 1989: 269). Criticism of the new cemeteries set up in Paris in the 1780s, following cessation of the centuries old tradition of burial at Les Innocents, focused on the fact that it was inappropriate for the sites to be bounded as they were by old planks and boards (Ariès, 1983). A secure boundary had a dual purpose: protecting the dead from disturbance and—increasingly in the 18th and 19th century—sequestering the dead from the living. The cemetery also has an entrance that declares the meaning of the site either literally or symbolically. During the 1820s and 1830s, when cemetery development was gathering pace, classical motifs, particularly images from ancient Egypt, were considered appropriate for cemetery architecture (Curl, 1982). Designs including inverted torches, and snakes devouring their own tails, were often integrated into entrance gate architecture. At Père Lachaise Cemetery, the entrance gates were surmounted by two hourglasses. These images, indicating the termination of life, eternity and the passage of time, were not used in any other sort of context. Thus both the boundary and the entrance gate define the cemetery as a separate place with a special purpose.

A further important feature of cemeteries is that they offer the possibility of, and a context for, memorializing a particular individual: the identity of the deceased can be enshrined in the site’s internal order. Implicit in the landscaping of a cemetery is the ability of users to locate a specific grave. Thus, internally, the site will be divided by roads and paths: each grave will have an established ‘address’, registered as such in the site’s documentation and so giving each family a sense of ownership of and control over a particular plot. Early cemeteries offered burial rights ‘in perpetuity’, granting families rights over burial plots from which the remains would never be removed. In much of Southern Europe, skeletal remains are removed to such plots after a period in a grave which is then reused (Goody & Poppi, 1994). However, in Britain after the Reformation and in the USA, the overt reuse of graves did not become part of the burial culture: burial rights granted in perpetuity guaranteed that graves would never be disturbed and the remains would stay intact. It is often the case that perpetuity graves have some sort of marker, ranging from elaborate statuary and monumentation through to single plaques set into a lawn. For some historians the popularity of the cemetery in the 19th century hinges on its capacity to give families space for such a marker, as an expression both of grief and of status (Cannadine, 1981).

In addition to certain physical features, cemeteries can also be distinguished by their purpose and ownership. The principal function of the cemetery—as with many other burial sites—is the interment of the dead. However, as with other sites, the population represented by the dead is an important consideration. Generally cemeteries serve a complete community, with the catchment area being an entire district or town. Ariès notes that one aim of early French Revolutionary cemeteries was to represent a microcosm of society, reproducing the community as a whole: “all are brought together in the same enclosure, but each has his own place” (Ariès, 1983: 503; McManners, 1981). The cemetery’s
‘completeness’ in this regard has remained a distinguishing feature. That is not to say that the site does not contain internal demarcation. Echoing societal divisions, areas within the site may be set aside for the exclusive use of religious groups or minority ethnic communities. The allocation of space within the site may take place when the cemetery is established, or develop over time. For example, in Australia Adelaide’s West Terrace Cemetery was established in the late 1830s, and within a decade contained special sections for Church of England burials and the Jewish and Roman Catholic communities. By 1855 a further portion had been granted over for exclusive use by Quakers (Nichol, 1994: 85). Most British cemeteries have consecrated and unconsecrated sections; and in such places as Ireland and Quebec, demarcations are common between Catholic and Protestant sections (Prior, 1989). However, despite the segregation, these minority communities still remain part of the whole: cemeteries, for the most part, accommodate all.

The purpose of cemeteries can extend beyond the community’s need for burial space. The reasons attached to cemetery foundation change over time, and can include concerns over public health (Finer, 1952) and a desire to offer protection and privacy both to the corpse and to the bereaved (McManners, 1981). The cemetery can also be a way of demonstrating a degree of civic pride (Bender, 1975). The ebb and flow of ideas attached to burial of the dead also means that cemeteries—as defined in this paper—can be located within a specific time period: it is possible to trace the chronology of their inception and development. Thus, cemeteries fitting the description given here are a distinctive development in the modern period. Interest in burial reform becomes marked from the second decade of the 18th century in mainland Europe (Etlin, 1984; Quer, 1989), and from the second decade of the 19th century in the UK, the USA and Australia (Rugg, 1998; Nichol, 1994; Sloane, 1995). The common establishment of cemeteries tends to be a feature of the 19th century.

In many European countries, the municipality has dominated the provision of cemeteries, which tend to be managed as any other local service, for example environmental health enforcement or recreational amenities. Private enterprise has also constituted a leading agency for cemetery establishment: in the USA, through private corporations; and in the UK in the 19th century through joint stock companies. Although the scale of operations may vary—ownership may be by a large multimillion dollar business concern or a town council operating only one site—the essential feature is that ownership is principally secular. In most cases the involvement of religious authorities tends to be marginal, although there are exceptions. For example, in Denmark and Sweden Church authorities have maintained a degree of control over the expansion of burial facilities, which in all other respects reflects cemetery development (Nielsen, 1989; Reimers, 1999).

A further distinguishing feature of different kinds of burial sites is the extent to which they are regarded as ‘sacred’. ‘Sacredness’ is a concept that is in itself slippery (Hubert, 1994). Dictionary definitions give the word a range of
meanings, from the ‘holy’ and ‘consecrated’, implying a spiritual element, through to ‘protected from irreligious action’ and the almost secular in tone ‘worthy of or regarded with reverence, awe or respect’ (Makins, 1991). The sacred nature of cemetery space is a subject worthy of more detailed discussion than can be presented here. Perhaps as a precursor to extended debate, it is contended that, although some cemeteries are opened after rituals that consecrate all or part of the site, cemeteries are for the most part considered sacred only in so far as the site is ‘regarded with respect’. Much of this respect rests largely on the fact that the site acts as a context for grief, and it is the bereaved that need to be protected from inappropriate activity. Thus, behaviour in cemeteries can be subject to a number of regulations, banning for example ball games or loud music (Strange, 2000). In some of the older Victorian cemeteries in the UK, the areas still in use continue to be subject to strict regulation and high quality grounds maintenance, but policy becomes more relaxed in the older areas of the site, since their importance as a locale for grief has passed with time (Dunk & Rugg, 1994).

There are two further, closely associated, elements that combine as a measure of the sacred nature of burial sites: pilgrimage and permanence. ‘Pilgrimage’ is a term that can be used to describe visits to a burial site for the purpose of tending or viewing a particular grave. Three intertwined reasons can be ascribed to grave visits: the private and personal (Francis et al., 2000); the overtly or inadvertently political (Hartman, 1986); and the recreational (Rojek, 1993). In the case of the cemetery, going to the site is for the most part a private and personal activity. The majority of visitors have friends or family buried at the site, and the essential interest in the site is largely restricted to a particular town. The 19th century cemetery is often embedded in local historical narrative, partly because of its use over generations, partly because it tended to flourish in periods of rapid urban growth, and partly because it often achieved a near monopoly with respect to accommodating the dead of a particular location. The high incidence of visits over a protracted period of time means that the site becomes sacred and is afforded some degree of permanence. In the UK cemeteries are protected by a combination of legislative enactment and popular opinion on what is appropriate with respect to cemetery land. As a consequence, few cemeteries are destroyed; as will be seen, other types of burial space are much more vulnerable to obliteration.

Thus cemeteries can be defined as specifically demarcated sites of burial, with internal layout that is sufficiently well ordered to allow families to claim and exercise control over their particular grave space, and which facilitate the conducting of appropriate funerary ritual. Although cemetery space can be regarded to some degree as sacred, cemeteries are principally secular institutions that aim to serve the whole community. The sites are able to carry multiple social and political meanings. The importance of drawing out all these definitional features becomes more apparent when cemeteries are compared and contrasted with churchyards.
Churchyards

Churchyards can also be given a particular definition, in which some similarities with cemeteries are evident. Much of the resemblance rests with physical characteristics. Like cemeteries, churchyards also have boundaries and a distinctive entrance gate that declares their purpose. Traditionally in the UK, lych-gates—shelters incorporated into the churchyard gate to house the coffin temporarily—have often marked the entrance to churchyards (Bailey, 1987). However, churchyards tend to be located at the centre of communities rather than on their periphery. The sites also tend to be smaller in size: ‘God’s acre’ is often an accurate description of physical scale. Before the 19th century, graves in churchyards in the USA and UK were generally reused, which meant that a small tract of land could readily accommodate the parish dead without need of extension. However, this situation broke down as the rapid expansion of urban populations and the popularization of memorials placed pressure on such limited provision.

Within churchyards, further distinctions emerge. The sometimes regimented nature of cemeteries is rarely reflected in the landscape of the churchyard. Paths and roadways ease movement around the churchyard, and graves often have markers, but the sense of each grave having a particular address is far less obvious than in a cemetery. Unlike cemeteries, churchyards have not been bounded by regulations on the registration of individual graves, and the unfettered reuse of ground is reflected in the landscape. The inability of churchyards to protect the physical integrity of the deceased and provide a permanent place expressing their identity was one reason why there was a shift towards cemetery burial (Richardson, 1989). However, churchyards can still provide a locale for the expression of social status through ostentatious monumentation, and through securing a burial location in the ‘preferred’ part of the site—towards the north, and close to the church building (Young, 1960).

Unlike other burial sites, ownership and purpose is inextricably linked with the sacred nature of churchyards, which is perhaps their defining characteristic. Like cemeteries, churchyards can derive an element of sacredness through the presence of the bereaved and the ability of the site to act as a locale for funerary ritual and grief. Much more significant, however, is the fact that churchyards are generally owned by the national Church; legislation governing churchyards is almost exclusively ecclesiastical; and most, but not all, surround or are immediately adjacent to a church. The connection to a place of ritual religious significance has, in the past, defined the reason for the use of churchyards: it was believed that benefits in the afterlife could be secured by being buried in land considered to be holy; before the Reformation, the presence of the dead immediately outside the Church was a reminder to living congregations to pray for the souls of the deceased. The value attached to the sacred nature of the churchyard is further demonstrated through the operation of exclusionary practices. For example, in the UK until 1823 it was considered inappropriate to inter suicides in the consecrated ground of churchyards. Individuals judged
to have been excommunicated were also denied burial in the churchyard, as were unbaptized children (Finucane, 1981; Fletcher, 1968). As well as conveying punishment to the deceased through being denied burial in the churchyard, these practices protected the sacred nature of the churchyard from the ‘unholy’ dead.

The sacred nature of churchyards is further signalled by their degree of permanence. Some sites can date back for centuries, since churchyard use in Europe became established from around the eighth century. Many, particularly rural, churchyards are still in use. However, in urban locations churchyards are often not particularly well embedded in modern local historical narratives. The introduction of cemeteries in many countries in Europe was accompanied by legislation that restricted or forbade use of by then overcrowded inner-city churchyards: many were closed (Rugg, 1992). Within the UK legislative enactments have eased the process of ‘deconsecrating’ churchyards, which are routinely passed to local authorities for maintenance. Clearance of memorials is often a consequence. The current status of many urban churchyards—often transformed into small parks—does not reflect their previous use as a burial site (Mytum et al., 1994). As Warner observes, many have effectively lost their sacred status (Warner, 1959). As society becomes more secular, burial sites that clearly commemorate individuals have become more sacred than those deemed holy by religious tenets.

Thus churchyards are principally characterized as places of burial made sacred through religious association, reflecting ancient beliefs that burial in ground deemed to be holy would carry spiritual benefits. Although churchyards aimed to serve the whole parish, exclusionary practices often operated as a means of punishing the ungodly and protecting the sacredness of the site (Laqueur, 1983). Thus churchyards operate within a distinctive framework that contrasts with cemeteries, and they evoke more rustic imagery usually associated with traditional religious tenets and even earlier pagan folklore. Cemeteries were often cited as evidence of civility and operated within an essentially secular urban milieu (Bender, 1975).

**Burial grounds**

Further contrasts can be drawn between cemeteries and burial grounds. Use of the term ‘burial ground’ has tended to be arbitrary: it may refer to all types of burial space, including cemeteries and churchyards; or it may refer more specifically to smaller and more informal sites. In order to aid the task of definition, this text does not use ‘burial ground’ as a generic term. Instead, the term is used to distinguish a particular type of burial space, the key characteristic of which hinges on the identity of the bereaved. It has been noted above that some cemeteries contain specific sections dedicated for the use of particular minority ethnic groups. In many cases, however, this type of burial space is located outwith the cemetery, in separate sites. Within all Western countries there exist thousands of examples of burial grounds that are dedicated to the use
of specific minority groups within the community: for example, Jews, African–Americans, Nonconformists or immigrant minorities. In many instances these minorities either choose or are compelled through exclusionary practices to lay out their own sites for interment. In many instances the purpose of the site extends beyond the need to accommodate the dead. The burial ground may be an essential component of that minority’s expression of identity, and its difference from mainstream provision becomes imperative. Indeed, its use by non-community members may be resisted. For example, one of the first material expressions of the settlement of Czech immigrants in Nebraska in the USA was the establishment of space for burial. The first site in the state was laid out just south of the town of Crete by the Czech community, following the death of one of the community members. However, by 1873 non Czechs had begun to insist that they be able to use the site. The result was that the cemetery was abandoned by the Czech community, which established a wholly Czech alternative elsewhere (Kiest, 1993). As this example demonstrates, the reason for establishing the burial ground rests in the need to provide space in which a minority community can conduct distinctive funerary practices. Thus the burial ground contrasts with the cemetery, which retains the aim of meeting the needs of the majority.

Despite this difference in purpose, it is often the case that burial grounds resemble cemeteries with respect to the visible structural features. Burial grounds usually have a defined boundary, and graves are often marked with individual memorials—although the style of memorials may be highly culture-specific. Within the USA there are thousands of ‘folk’ cemeteries, which are small burial grounds sometimes without boundary or formal internal structure, but which often contain memorials and which provide the context for distinctive funerary ritual. Jeane (1992) notes the particular characteristics of the folk cemeteries in the Upland South region of the USA. Burial grounds are used by small minority ethnic groups or by members of an extended family. Ownership varies considerably: some may be organized on a formal basis. For example, Jewish communities have long relied on burial societies, which finance the laying out of cemeteries through lifelong subscription payments from members who are then interred at the site at no cost, with ritual according to the Jewish faith (Susser, 1997). By contrast, the Friar’s Bush burial ground in Belfast, Northern Ireland was never formally established. From around 1570, the burial of Roman Catholics near a spot at which Mass was covertly read became commonplace, and over a period of centuries a burial ground evolved there principally for use of the Roman Catholic community. The burial ground was not enclosed until 1828, when an extra acre was added to the site, and a high wall and gatehouse were built (Pheonix, 1988). In some instances religious ceremonies may have sanctified the burial ground. However, the ground may only be regarded as sacred by the minority community, and can be vulnerable to destruction. Thus, small Nonconformist burial grounds in the UK are routinely subject to excavation and development; and during the Second World War it was estimated that hundreds of Jewish burial grounds were destroyed in Poland alone, with
gravestones used to pave the streets (Jagielski, 1995). In some instances the threat of destruction can become a political issue. In the USA there has been great controversy attached to the proposed destruction of one African–American burial ground in New York. The site is now dedicated to the people who are buried there and to all who were enslaved in the city’s early history (Wright & Hughes, 1995).

**Mass graves**

A third type of burial space is the mass grave. This term is used to define a location in which burial has taken place on a large scale, but where the bodies lack individual identity. This situation may arise for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which being that death has taken place on such a scale that it becomes impossible to deal with each set of remains as a separate entity. The consequence is burial en masse within existing churchyards, cemeteries or burial grounds, or at a single site or collection of sites. Instances include the mass burial sites that follow tragedies such as famine, disease, disaster or war. For example, in Ireland between 1845 and 1851 the Great Famine claimed a million lives out of a population of just eight million. The landscape is dotted with mass graves since, in order to prevent disease, interment was hasty and often took place close to where the death had occurred rather than in established burial places (Póirtéir, 1995). Particularly virulent attacks of diseases such as cholera and smallpox called for the establishment of mass graves to segregate corpses that, because of disease, were deemed especially dangerous to the living. For example, in 1793 a yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia took the lives of over a tenth of the population; a mass grave was established in an uninhabited region of the town (Foster et al., 1993). Natural disasters such as the 1999 Turkish earthquake could also mean that traditional funerary practices are suspended. There, the sudden need to accommodate thousands of dead led to the use of mass graves and quicklime to hasten decomposition (Bowcott, 1999). Wartime atrocities are often followed by undifferentiated mass burial. For example, hundreds of thousands of victims of the Holocaust were flung, uncoffined and unclothed, into mass graves attached to concentration camps (Gilbert, 1986).

In all these cases, the contrast with much of the landscape in cemeteries, churchyards and minority burial grounds may be stark. Where one or more mass graves comprise the only type of burial at a particular site, the boundaries of the site are often hastily erected, incomplete or even totally absent. Indeed, where mass burial has followed mass murder, it may be the case that the site remains deliberately hidden. In the former Yugoslavia, a number of such sites have come to light years after the conflict has ended. Crucially, those interred at the site are denied—either deliberately or through exigency—any appropriate ritual at the time of burial, or even any expression of individual identity. Burial will be either side by side in long trenches, or one on top of another in deep pit graves. There will be no individual markers, and it may be uncertain who is actually buried
there. As a consequence, the site will have minimal internal structure: finding the burial location of a particular person will be impossible. The belief that disease could spread from the massed corpses means that these sites are often feared in the first days or weeks of their establishment, and visits from friends and family are unlikely or even discouraged. During the Irish Famine the need to contain the possible spread of epidemic meant that gravediggers were the only people in attendance at many burials (Póirtéir, 1995). Interment in mass graves is often a short-term emergency measure, with the usage of the site fixed in a time frame of no more than a matter of days or weeks. Unlike cemeteries, the status of such sites in a community’s history is difficult to fix: the anonymous nature of the burials and their number deny each set of remains its past humanity. If anything, the site becomes a means of remembering catastrophe or concealing atrocities rather than as a place to commemorate individuals.

The characteristics of mass graves become more marked in cases where they are located within existing cemeteries, churchyards or burial grounds. For example, the Friar’s Bush burial ground in Belfast contains ‘plaguey hill’, which is a substantial mound just inside the front entrance, containing the remains of thousands of victims of cholera and typhus epidemics of the 19th century (Pheonix, 1988). None of the people interred in the mass pit is identified by name on any stone or memorial, and the hill has not been landscaped. In many cemeteries mass graves are distinguished by their location on the edge of the site, a lack of memorials, and limited attention paid to aesthetics and landscaping.

Unlike any other sort of burial space, the use of the mass burial ground can denote punishment. Thus, the undifferentiated interment of Holocaust victims in pits constituted a horrifying practical response to the need to dispose of human remains; but, on another level, the use of mass burial could not be better calculated to offend the Jewish tradition of having a separate grave and marker for each individual. Perhaps much more commonly, mass burial has been used as a punishment for poverty. In the UK during the 19th century, paupers dying ‘on the parish’ were often buried in mass graves in unconsecrated ground, in coffins so badly made that the body could be seen through the cracks. This policy was one of a number of measures designed to deter the poor from seeking assistance (Crowther, 1982). Even where such a punishment is not intended, the poor have often been afforded burial sites in which identity and a permanent resting place are denied. In the USA many towns still have a ‘potter’s field’, where burial without ritual was given to those who were destitute or people who were subject to racial exclusion from mainstream provision. Many of the sites were poorly maintained and often abandoned to other uses (Sloane, 1995). It is evident, therefore, that few of such sites are regarded as sacred. The absence of the bereaved and of appropriate funerary ritual, and the loss of individual identity of the people interred at the site, means that these sites are granted limited respect. However, in some instances the sites can become sacred over time, as recognition of a past atrocity may draw pilgrims.
War cemeteries

Although similar to mass graves in the sense of their being established as a means of burying a large number of dead, the war cemetery remains a very specific type of burial space. Its most obvious purpose is the burial of military dead during or following periods of conflict. For example in 1862 during the American Civil War, a War Department Order required commanding officers to secure land for burial (Laderman, 1996). Similarly, ‘authorized sites’ were also selected for use by British officials in the First World War, as described retrospectively by Fabian Ware in 1926. The sites were close to the trenches, where the dead could be buried, and the soldiers were promised that, if they brought their dead comrades to these, which they not infrequently did at the cost of their lives, they would rest there permanently undisturbed (Ware, quoted in Gibson & Ward, 1995: 49).

Following the War, the promise was kept with respect to the sites, and the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission (CWGC) took responsibility for surveying areas where conflict had taken place, to locate remains. The subsequent war cemeteries established by the CWGC have specific aesthetic characteristics that have been the subject of a great deal of study (e.g. Winter, 1995) but their principal feature is a commitment to identifying and differentiating the deceased. Although they may be on the site of death on a massive scale, the graves are laid in rows and each set of remains is interred in a single grave. Each grave has a marker that is identical in size, shape and material, carrying the name, rank and regiment of the soldier interred in the grave, and a simple message. Where identity is not possible to determine, the gravestone is marked ‘Known to God’. If remains have not been recovered, but where it is certain that a particular individual died at that location, a separate headstone still records the name of the deceased, and the information that they died near the site (Gibson & Ward, 1995).

Like civic cemeteries and churchyards, war cemeteries are demarcated with site boundaries and have an ordered internal architecture to assist in the task of locating a particular grave. In many instances a grave register will be accessible at the site, in a special niche at the site entrance. However, unlike the civic cemeteries, the dead buried in war cemeteries are unlikely to be local to the area: they may come from another country or indeed another continent. As a consequence, the site may be visited by war veterans and family members who may undertake long journeys to pay their respects and make sense of their loss. These visits sometimes adopt the character of modern pilgrimages (Walter, 1993). Visits to the site may also be assigned a political purpose. For example, ex-US President Ronald Reagan’s visit to the German military cemetery at Bitburg was widely condemned as a signal of respect for the Nazi SS soldiers buried at the site (Hartman, 1986). Despite their commitment to the integrity of the individual, war cemeteries, like mass graves, often serve more as a
means of recalling the horror of a particular catastrophe than as a context for commemorating the death of any particular person.

Unlike the majority of civic cemeteries, ownership of war cemeteries is often held by agencies operating at a national or international level. In the USA military cemeteries are managed by the state-owned Veterans Administration; and the CWGC is funded through direct grants from the UK, Canada, Australia and other Commonwealth countries, paying proportionally according to the number of countrymen of their nationality interred at the sites (Gibson & Ward, 1995; Sloane, 1995). Often the sites will hold cultural significance beyond the requirement to accommodate the dead. For some commentators, war cemeteries convey an inherent critique of conflict, in forcefully underlining the sheer number of individual sacrifices that war demands. Other commentators have described a more oblique political purpose: war cemeteries, in the basic uniformity of the monumentation, can convey a commitment to democracy. A further interpretation is offered by Robin, who describes the way that US war cemeteries in Europe after World War Two were thought by contemporaries to stand as symbols of America (Robin, 1995).

Pantheons

Defined as ‘a monument or building commemorating a nation’s dead heroes’, the pantheon carries strong political purpose as a celebration of nationhood. It is not always the case that the pantheon contains actual interments. For example, the Walhalla near Regensburg on the banks of the Danube holds visual representations of the heroes of Germany, including Goethe, Kant and Haydn (Curl, 1993). However, other sites do constitute the last resting place of the nationally or even internationally renowned. One of the most significant examples is the Panthéon in Paris. The Church of Sainte Geneviève was adopted by the French National Assembly in 1791 to celebrate the heroes of the Revolution (Etlin, 1984). The first burial was that of popular orator Honoré Mirabeau. Philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, both of whom had died before the Panthéon was created, were disinterred for re-entombment at the site, the use of which has continued through to the present day. A similar degree of national celebration is evident in Prague’s Vyehrad Cemetery. Laid out in the first half of the 19th century, the cemetery’s establishment reflected the national revival of Czech culture. The site is dedicated to the nation’s artists and intellectuals, and the graves include those of composer Dvorák and the influential writer Božena Něcová (Soukup, 1997).

As with war cemeteries, the pantheon transcends the local context, and is usually owned and maintained by the state. The site can often have political significance. Generally, the site is sacred because of the presence of the illustrious dead, rather than as a result of any religious ritual. Visits to the site tend to be dominated more by an element of pilgrimage and even sightseeing than by grief at the loss of a loved one. On the whole this sacred quality grants the sites a degree of permanence. For example, at the centre of the city of York
is a small cemetery which has been maintained simply because it contains the remains of Dick Turpin, a highway robber who has passed into popular mythology akin to that attached to Robin Hood. However, where burials have taken place of national or political figures, these sorts of site may be vulnerable. For example, in both China and Russia, areas containing the graves of revolutionary heroes were destroyed in successive waves of counter-revolution (Whyte, 1988).

Civic cemeteries and burial grounds may acquire the nature of pantheons. Père Lachaise is just one of a number of Parisian cemeteries that attracts visitors because of the celebrity of people who are buried there. Similarly, the cemetery at Montparnasse, containing the remains of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre, advertises itself in local tourist guides as a ‘jardinpanthéon’, and includes a trail to help visitors locate the graves of the famous (Tiberi, n.d.). Rojek notes the way in which cemeteries in Los Angeles attract tourists to view the graves of famous film stars, and mentions other sites attracting similar attention because of the famous dead, including the Protestant Cemetery in Rome and Highgate Cemetery in London (Rojek, 1993). It is perhaps at these sorts of sites that pilgrimage shades into pleasure-seeking and recreation. Rojek contends that this ‘death tourism’ is particular to the modern period, failing to note that a visit to the cemetery—whether to view the last resting place of the famous, partake in melancholy remembrance, or to enjoy the landscape—was very much a Victorian pastime (Brooks et al., 1989).

Conclusion

It is clear from this discussion that cemeteries constitute a particular type of burial space, that can best be understood through appreciating the nature of four interlinked features: physical characteristics; ownership and meaning; the site’s relationship to personal and community identities; and sacredness. The act of defining a cemetery rests in answering questions relating to each of these features, and introduces a level of analysis that enhances the possibility of interdisciplinary and international comparative work. However, it should again be emphasized that the nature of burial space is not immutable. Even without the operation of other factors, the passage of time alone can change the nature and meaning of individual sites. The cemetery’s physical characteristics will alter: at a very basic level, landscapes will mature and taste in memorial design will change. In some instances, memorials are removed as they become unsafe or expensive to maintain, and the landscape may become an uncertain indicator of the identity of the deceased. Indeed, over time, cemeteries may acquire the characteristics of local parks. The ownership of the site may change, and management practices will alter as each generation defines its key reasons for seeking to dispose of the dead in a particular type of cemetery landscape. The site may become increasingly sacred or less so, depending on a range of factors including general shifts in attitudes towards the dead, whether the site contains
the remains of the ‘famous’ dead, and the influence of revisionist histories that may seek to reclaim particular sites for political purposes.

Defining cemeteries in comparison with other types of burial space introduces a context for questions that have rarely been asked of those spaces. For example, issues relating to ownership and purpose are infrequently brought into discussion of different types of burial space, since it is often assumed that the need for land for interment constitutes the only possible explanation for the site’s development. The changing status of churchyards in modern society has yet to receive scholarly attention; and the response of the bereaved to the use of mass graves has been the subject of only limited study. The evolution of cemetery into pantheon is a process that would merit research, as would the use of such burial sites for nationalistic purposes. These questions should not be viewed as more or less appropriate to a particular academic arena. Certainly all these questions could be answered within the confines of a single discipline such as history or sociology. However, cemetery studies is an essentially interdisciplinary activity, and it is hoped that this paper has demonstrated the value of taking material from a range of studies that themselves rely on a variety of methods.

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REFERENCES


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