

How does the study of urban cemeteries shed light on the communities that are buried within them?

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1. Introduction

19th century towns and cities had become hugely over-populated with people striving for economic well-being and recognition within their social environment. Inevitably the needs of the living competed with the dead.

At a macro level an expanding urban population inevitably impacted, or disturbed, the established social, economic and political environment and at a micro level there were too many bodies to be contained within the existing graveyards. People were revolted by the overcrowded and putrid graveyards where internments were often temporary and disrespectful (Gordon and Marshall, 2003:170). Urban cemeteries were the solution to this particular crisis.

Urban cemeteries were markedly different than graveyards; their characteristic style was an expression of the period's society. Many memorials, erected by wealthier patrons, reflected the social persona and individuality of the living while keeping within social norms. The poor, and people outside of society, were typically treated as pragmatically and impersonally as society dictated.

2. Urban Cemeteries

To understand the communities interred in urban cemeteries we must initially consider the society and environment which necessitated their introduction and then consider a cemetery's environment as an archaeological and cultural artefact.

Many cemeteries share characteristics reflecting the accepted norms of ritual and symbolism. Their material culture may be used to model societies' complexity and hierarchy. There are variations to any model, especially across national boundaries, and these exceptions are equally revealing of the communities they served.

2.1 Why were Urban Cemeteries needed?

Urban populations expanded drastically as the industrial revolutions' insatiable demand for labour caused the migration of rural populations, often displaced by land enclosures (Kain *et al.*, 2004:1-3), into towns and cities. For example the population of London grew 208% from 960,000 in 1801 to 2,000,000 forty years later (Turpin and Knight, 2011:12). People squeezed into housing which was increasingly overcrowded and unhealthy.

The creation of urban cemeteries in the early 19th century resulted from a crisis. This crisis was caused by the lack of physical space to bury the growing urban populations and cemeteries were one of the bi-products of widespread social, economic and political changes which impacted towns and cities of many countries. By observing the rapid change from burials in graveyards to cemeteries we can understand some of factors which differentiated the Early Modern period (c.1500 - 1800) from the Modern period (c.1800 - onwards) [as defined by Carroll (2003:8)].

George 'Graveyard' Walker (1839:3, 9) described London's poorer neighbourhoods as crowded hovels where occupants lived in conditions of "hopeless misery" in accommodation which cost the majority of their income. Walker, who crusaded for the reform of urban burial practices, wrote horrific descriptions of the overcrowded graveyards and crypts, the disrespectful treatment of bodies and the association between burials, disease and epidemics. Medical journals, religious publications and the press unanimously agreed with Walker (PCM, 2009:1-2) however he was unable

to produce evidence linking burials to disease and was unsuccessful in forcing political and legislative action.

The United Kingdom's established church derived significant income from burials and had little motivation to support change; during 1838 London's St Giles-in-the-Fields, a notorious slum, generated fees from burials of £764 (May, 2006:20). The *laissez-faire* government eventually passed legislation in 1852 which initiated a framework for municipal cemeteries in London and firmly moved death from a religious monopoly to a secular responsibility (Rugg, 1999:215).

Resistance from the established church and government inertia could not prevent entrepreneurs and local-leaders taking action. Non-conformist cemeteries, such as Belfast and Norwich, were built as an alternative to Anglican churchyards. Town councils, such as Hull and Liverpool, reacted to their chronic shortage of burial space by building cemeteries (Curl, 2002:134). However, most cemeteries were constructed by private enterprise for profit (Kith & Kin, 2011). Kensal Green Cemetery (see Figure 4.1), for example, which emulated Père Lachaise the famed Parisian cemetery (see Figure 4.2), was established in 1833 (Rutherford, 2011:17) and during the following decade six other cemeteries were created; together they are known as the 'The Magnificent Seven' (Turpin and Knight, 2011:9). These cemeteries were financed by a joint-stock company which returned annual dividends. Liverpool, for example, which was founded by non-conformists, returned an annual dividend of 8% to its shareholders (Rutherford, 2011:13). In my opinion the commercial urban cemetery is a good representation of the market-forces which dominated the 19th century.

The popularity of urban cemeteries is demonstrated by Meller and Parsons (2011:8) who report that by 1900, in London, there were 86 cemeteries and this the trend continued until 1967 when cremations replaced burials in popularity (see Figure 4.3).

2.2 What is an Urban Cemetery?

19th century contemporary writers used glowing, but nationalistic, prose to describe the virtues of cemeteries (Strang, 1831 and Loudon, 1843 cited in Curl, 1983:133). They wrote that cemeteries were a "convincing token of a nation's progress in civilization and the arts" which developed the public's morals, manners and "virtuous and generous feelings" while the planting cultivated "intellect".

Physically the urban, or garden, cemeteries, whether private or municipal, often shared common characteristics. They were initially constructed on cheap rural land which had existing roads connecting it to its urban 'customers'. The land would preferably be hilly to make the most of natural drainage.

Cemeteries were landscaped to form an attractive and peaceful setting. They were heavily planted with trees, enclosed by a high wall or fence and, overall, were comparable to a country estate. The cemetery was separated by paths into zones where different denominations or, in some cases, secular associations could be buried together. For example Sacramento has zones for Freemasons and Firemen (Architectural Resources Group, 2007:19). Chapels were built for holding services, offices for the cemetery's management and record keeping and, in some rare cases such as Woking (Curl, 2001:142) and Rookwood (Rookwood, 2011), railway stations. The human-crafted environment was carefully designed so that the living, especially

those with social standing, would be proud, and prepared to pay, to place their dead in an attractive environment (Rutherford, 2011:18,25). Wealthier people's graves were memorialized by gravestones, tombs or mausolea.

Cemeteries were more than a pleasant place to be buried or to mourn the deceased. As Mytum (1989:295) says they are a continuation of the living person's property and represented a permanent statement of status and success - Tallow (2000:231) adds that this is a manifestation of 19th century capitalism.

Urban cemeteries were not a static environment and over time they responded to changing tastes; for example during the early 20th century saw a decreasing popularity of the ostentatious and clichéd practices of the previous century (Tarlow, 1999:147). Practicalities also stimulated change; for example Lawn Cemeteries, which echoed the orderly lines of graves found in 20th century war cemetery, and the popularity of cremation as a hygienic and economic alternative to internment.

2.3 Cultural Norms and Cemeteries

The dead are disposed of using culturally accepted norms of ritual and symbolism (Bello and Andrews, 2009:7) and, because the "living bury the dead" (Tarlow, 1999:177; Sofaer, 2009:156), each burial is a 'statement' of the relationship between the dead and the living. I suggest that we can extend this to say that a cemetery is a proxy for the community that utilized it.

Many urban cemeteries are still used for burials. Others have become green-spaces which are valued by the local community. Few are excavated but the material culture in cemeteries can be cheaply, non-destructively and ethically studied (Tarlow 1999:10-14). This study often begins with the biographies available from gravestones, tombs and mausolea. Graves invariably have a person's name and date of death which gives very fine grained information which excavation often cannot. Cemeteries typically contain large numbers of burials and over an extended period of time; the potential for genealogical and demographic research is significant. The information on individual gravestones can, in some cases, be supplemented by written history. Collectively the biographies form a who's who of socio-economic groupings (Rutherford, 2011:41) and Tarlow goes further, explaining a theory proposed by Binford, and says that we can use this information to model cultural complexity and social hierarchy.

We must use memorials and mausolea with some caution because they do not represent a cross-section of the population (i.e. only the more affluent could afford them (Marr, 2006:93)).

Demographic study reveals a wide range of socio-economic information on the individuals interred within a cemetery (Allar, 2011:16,20) including their age, sex, social status, affiliations, cause and location of death (Chapman, 2003:306) as well as infant mortality, economic trends (i.e. burial expenditure), seasonal trends, ethnic and cultural origins and, in some cases, occupation. Broader interpretation might reveal information on population trends and health or specific events such as epidemics, racial segregation, immigration, regional and international variations and familial associations.

Trigger (1996:616) observed that material remains can be a source of information about human history even without written records but during this period we often have the 'luxury' of detailed historic information. The British Empire began civil registrations of Births, Deaths and Marriages in 1837 and held a Census every decade since 1841 (Directgov, 2012); in America, as with most European countries, it varies from state to state (NCHS, 2012). Trigger feels that this was atypical of the development of nationalism - for example during the Industrial Revolution in Europe - where there was a greater focus on "citizens as a collective group" and a burgeoning middle-class.

The 19th century was a period of architectural and scientific innovation and, as Meller and Parsons (2011:13) say, this impacted many aspects of daily-life as well as institutions such as hospitals, workhouses, asylums, prisons and cemeteries. During their period Christian society moderated its views on the terrors of death; religious thinking on the afterlife evolved from 'hellfire and damnation' to 'sleep' and this became a common and visible metaphor for a good death. This metaphor was echoed in literature and art; for example Henry Bowler's 1855 work 'The Doubt: Can These Dry Bones Live?' (see Figure 4.4), answers the subject's concern, on whether the exposed bones can be re-born, through the use of symbolism and iconography (Wheeler, 1994:1). Cemeteries abound with crosses, obelisks and angels (see Figure 4.5) as Victorians reflected their beliefs through their material culture which was designed not only to name the deceased but to carry unequivocal messages to the viewer (Rugg, 1999:202-203).

Rutherford (2011: 41,45,51) defined the following hierarchy:

Mausoleum

Commissioned by the wealthiest patrons to commemorate, and house, their family. They were built using a variety of forms in the grandest styles and with the finest materials and architects.

Vault or Monument

Built with a vast variety of styles and sizes for a people of some standing and held a number of internments.

Gravestone or Loculus

Gravestones, or loculus in the Mediterranean (Mytum, 1989:295), were a common and cost effective solution for the middle-classes but they were out of the reach of many of the poor (Tarlow, 1999:173).

Common or Guinea Grave

A single plot used for multiple burials of unrelated people which included a shared gravestone and a short inscription. This was popular with poorer people (a guinea was approximately one week's wage). At least one cemetery's business model was based on high-density common-graves (Curl, 2001:109).

Pauper's Grave

A public or pauper's grave held multiple internments and it was typically unmarked. This burial is devoid of the burial customs associated with other types of urban burials such as funeral services, hearse and mourners (Strange, 2003:147).

A cemetery's material culture cannot be used as a universal measure of social standing. Some religions, such as Jew and Quakers, are less ostentatious and family traditions can vary. The absence of grave-markers might be the only indication of Pauper's Graves - assuming that the area was not reused. Tarlow (1999:13) explains that cemeteries can be rearranged and where gravestones have been relocated the socio-economic groupings will have been lost or at least confused.

The cemetery can be differentiated spatially using areas reserved for different religious beliefs or societies, by the evolution over-time of styles, symbolism and iconography, and the demonstration of visible wealth (or the lack of it). We need to remember that some plots were not purchased in perpetuity; grave ownership varies culturally; for example the Mediterranean and North and East European traditions described by Mytum (2006:216-217).

2.4 Exceptions to the 'rule'?

All industrialized societies, as populations transitioned from rural to urban environments, have had to resolve the issues of the dead. Because urban cemeteries reflect the communities that they served any with characteristics outside of the local norm are of particular research interest. There are numerous exceptions to the 'rule' and I have used some examples to represent three reoccurring themes:

Colonial

Colonial cemeteries are found around the world. The style in these outposts reflects the colonial power's burial practices – noting that the local environment might not allow identical practices.

Kolkata, in North East India and Surat, North West India, were the forerunners of the urban cemetery (Curl, 2001:29-30). Expatriate professional classes, and their families, developed grandiose cemeteries, located outside of urban areas, which contained mausolea modelled on the grandest tombs of Mughal royalty and with a variety of hybrid styles. They were laid-out like a town with rows of upper-class residences (see Figure 4.6) and were reserved for colonial residents and they varied significantly from the indigenous population's burial customs.

Gibraltar's North Front Cemetery, discussed by Mytum (2006:223-230), has two significant stylistic variations; firstly the mainly Catholic population developed a different style of burials than Spain, which is geographically adjacent, and secondly a colonial plantation of predominantly Anglican British burials. The majority of burials within the Catholic zone are in communal family tombs and, unlike Spain, very few are above ground. Anglican burials have simple gravestones and one-third of the burials are for military personnel - demographic studies reveal that very few burials are for people from the same family and infant mortality was higher than in Britain. Unsurprisingly the Anglican cemetery is neglected where the Catholic zone is well maintained by the local community.

Sydney's Rookwood cemetery holds over one million burials and is the largest cemetery in the world (Rutherford, 2011:56-57). It followed British burial trends (Murray, 2003:130) and has divisions based on denominations but it also has ethnic divisions (Mytum, 2006:222). Denominations were granted different sized areas based on the 1861 census (Rookwood, 2011); today there are seven

chapels, two crematorium and 12 shrines and major zones include Catholic (85-hectares), Anglican (71-hectares), Jewish (15-hectares), Moslem (2-hectares) and Independent (57-hectares). It also has a War Memorial zone and smaller ethnic and cultural areas such as Chinese, Serbian and Maori burials. Rookwood, predominantly followed the 'norm' for urban cemeteries in England, but also evolved into a universal cemetery which facilitated Sydney's multicultural population.

Political 'Statements'

An urban cemetery, as well as having a purely functional use, can fulfill a political agenda. In Russia's post-revolutionary cemeteries 'Red' funerals were for people who died fighting the Tsar; they became the social-elite within the cemetery (Merridale, 2003:177-179). This parallels China's Cult of the Red Martyr (Hung, 2008:282-284,293) where the state encouraged people to mourn these martyr's as national inspirations. Beijing's revolutionary cemetery is divided into zones by official or military rank, rather than social status, and its material culture is designed to reinforce the socialist ideal and nationalism.

Necessity

Smits (2008:111-116) described the burials in Oregon cemeteries of Chinese-Americans as an excellent example of where traditional Chinese practices merged over time into a blend of American and Chinese rituals. Chinese migrants represented 9.2% of the population and 95% were male. Male bodies, following cultural tradition, were exhumed, between 2 and 10 years after burial, and repatriated to China for reburial with their family. Excavations, to re-locate the cemetery, revealed grave goods, often manufactured in China, and the remains women and children (only men were repatriated). The Chinese community, while conforming to some of the practices in their host country, such as increasing use of gravestones with English text, retained many traditional cultural practices including male repatriation and grave goods.

North American burial traditions mirrored Europe but in New Orleans, which has a high water table and seasonal flooding, a different strategy was employed (Miller and Rivera, 2006:338,340). The cemeteries, which residents call 'Cities of the Dead', have above ground tombs and Loculi, similar to those within the Mediterranean Tradition described by Mytum (2006:216), but with perpetual ownership of plots which is atypical of the British and North American Tradition. The St Louis III Cemetery is an "extension of the city"; it is divided into streets with individual names, each burial plot has an individual number and social-stratification is preserved with 'rich' and 'poor' tombs.

3. Conclusions

The urban cemetery was a 19th century response to the crisis of rapidly expanding urban populations and the concentration of populations was caused by the formation of industrialized societies. At a micro-level cemeteries are a central location to contain the growing numbers of dead in a healthy and respectful environment and a pleasant place to be buried or to mourn the deceased. At a macro-level they are a reflection of the communities that they served and their characteristic style was an expression of the period's society and a matter of local and even national pride.

Urban cemeteries evolved over time in response to a number of factors such as changing tastes, lack of space, demand for more cost-effective or hygienic burials or even more traumatic events such as wars and revolutions. This evolution can be combined with biographical information, from gravestones and written history, to form a who's who of socio-economic groupings. Inevitably cemeteries developed a regional style which reflected their distinct topographical environments and cultural expectations as well as local variations.

Cemeteries are differentiated spatially by zones, to segregate religious beliefs or societies, and stylistically, over-time, by symbolism, iconography, and the demonstration of financial means – as well as a representation of the culturally accepted norms of ritual and symbolism. They have a unique material culture reflecting the social persona and individuality of the living. This material culture provides a visual reflection of the individual's socio-economic standing and aspirations. Collectively cemeteries are a representation of 19th century entrepreneurial and capitalistic society during a period of energetic architectural and scientific innovation. Individually plots are an extension of private property and a permanent statement of status and success.

Archaeologically cemeteries reveal fine grained stratigraphic information - which excavation often cannot provide – and, because they can contain large numbers of burials which happened over a long time-period, the genealogical and demographic data is rich, deep and accessible without destructive excavation.

The value of urban cemeteries, although still in its infancy, is unquestioned. They contain a wealth of information which has significance to a range of disciplines, including historians, anthropologists and archaeologists as well as the local communities and the families of the dead.

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4. Figures

Figure 4.1: Artistic representation of the Kensal Green Cemetery, c.1832 (Curl, 2002:219)



Figure 4.2: A row of tombs, emulating a street, in the Cimetière of Père-Lachaise (Curl, 1983:139)



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Figure 4.3: Burials and Cremations in the United Kingdom, 1885 - 2010 (CRG, 2011)

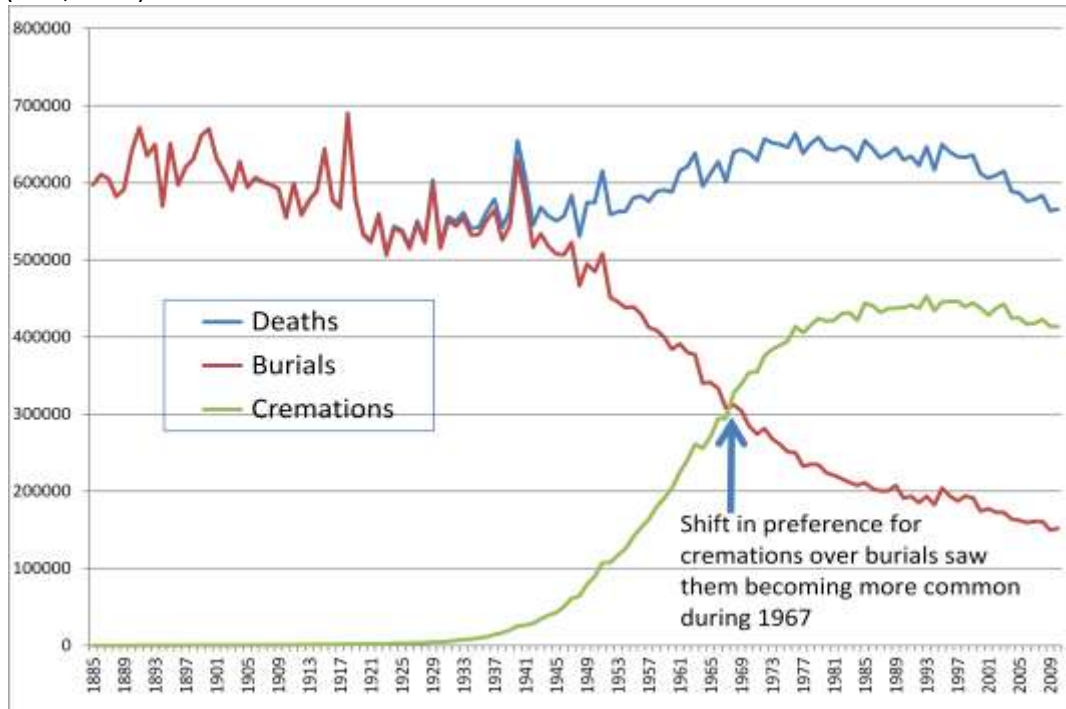


Figure 4.4: Reflective art, Henry Bowler 1855 (after Rugg, 1999:plate 18)



Figure 4.5: Angel statue, Highgate Cemetery (Keister, 2004:163)



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Figure 4.6: Avenue of Mausolea, South Park Street Cemetery, Calcutta, India
(Curl, 2001:31)



Figure 4.7: St. Louis above ground tombs paralleling homes of the living
(Miller and Rivera, 2006:339)



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