Hidden Dimensions: Recognizing Embedded Beliefs & Customs in Burial Practices

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Gravestones: Font of Information

Values and Worldviews
Fears & Beliefs
Social Position & Associations
Ethnicity
Kinship
Religious Affiliation
Landscape
Diversity of Burial Ideology

- Order versus chaos (or natural asymmetry)
- Corporate versus individual or familial Identity
- Concern with corporeal versus spiritual being
- Orientation and privilege
- Marginalization or sacred exclusion of social deviants
- Marginalization or exclusion of racial, ethnic, or religious outsiders
- Belief in and fear of the supernatural
- Secular versus religious emphasis
- Attitudes toward land use
Cemeteries elicit emotional responses, intentionally through their designs and embedded ideologies, and unintentionally through deeper human fears and anxieties.
As an interface with the spirit world, they also assume a more dangerous aspect at night.
Common Beliefs about the Dead

- The dead remain sentient
- The dead transform into dangerous spiritual beings
- Victims of violent death are especially dangerous
- The dead and/or their possessions and names have the power to harm the living (unless tended and respected)
- Proximity to or contact with the dead, their possessions, or speaking their names brings illness/death
- Burial of social deviants next to ‘good’ people may taint the good
- The body is just the vessel for the spirit
- The body is an essential vessel that needs to be kept intact for the soul’s resurrection
Graveyard Indicators

- Divine or magical numbers (usually sets of 3, 4, 5, or 7 or multiples thereof)
- Orientation (E-W)
- Placement
- Religious symbolism
- Magical symbolism
- Non-religious symbolism
- Materials and level of ostentation
- Plants
- Landscape associations
Divine or magical numbers

- Design elements and patterns
- Measurements of marker
- Measurements of grave plot
- Distances between graves
Placement

- Right/Left arrangement
- Inside/Outside boundary
- Confined to one section or segregated areas
- Ordered/Random arrangement
Religious Symbolism

- Particular religion or sect
- Biblical ideology
- Confined to one section or segregated areas
- Orientation
Magical Symbolism

- Numerical patterns
- Protective plants
- Protective designs
Non-Religious Symbolism

- Occupation
- Fraternal membership
- Military
- Age-related
- Personal identity
- Social standing
Resources

Brown, Ryland
*If the Stones Could Speak: A Guide to the Shapes and Symbols in Your Local Cemetery*

Cooper, Gaylord
*Stories Told in Stone: Cemetery Iconology*

Dedusk, Jacqueline
*A Beginner’s Dictionary of Cemetery Iconography*

Goodrich, MA
*Cemetery Art and Symbolism in North America*

Keister, Douglas
*Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*

Snider, Tui
*Understanding Cemetery Symbols: A Field Guide for Historic Graveyards*

Varner, Gary
*Remembrances of the Dead: Graveyard Art and Symbolism*
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