

Material Culture and Spaces of Remembrance: A Study of Cemeteries in Luxembourg in the Context of the Greater Region

Christoph K. Streb

University of Luxembourg
christoph.streb@uni.lu

Thomas Kolnberger

University of Luxembourg
thomas.kolnberger@uni.lu

It is the goal of this paper to present an applied geographic information systems (GIS)-based, methodological approach of spatial and material analysis of graveyards and grave-markers, with a specific focus on the interrelatedness of spatiality and material culture. The research presented is part of the National Fund for Research (FNR) funded project “Material Culture and Spaces of Remembrance: A Study of Cemeteries in Luxembourg in the Context of the Greater Region”, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Sonja Kmec (University of Luxembourg), researching numerous aspects of funeral culture over a 200 year time frame from a historical and archaeological perspective. By collecting a first and complete sample of the available grave-markers and their spatial setting, it will be shown how a digital humanities approach can be applied in that particular field of study and how it can extend and deepen our knowledge of past and present funeral culture.

Broadening our understanding of the potential value of digital humanities in that particular research area is key, because it appears researchers have reached a plateau with regards to novel findings that might satisfy highest academic standards (cp. Veit, Baugher and Scharfenberger 2009) and go well beyond what has already been done since the 1960s (cp. Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966; Deetz and Dethlefsen 1967).

Seminal research on the material aspects of funeral culture, i.e. mainly grave-markers, is usually traced back to the works of Deetz (1977, 1996). His primary method of analysis is a diametric, frequency based visualization of certain grave-marker traits, referred to as battleship diagrams, and relating this diachronic distribution to dimensions of past social identity and social transformations. Even though the related research scope has been extended by numerous authors, very little has changed since then with regards to the focus on social identity, status and ideologies, usually represented by selected design traits of grave-markers. For example, Reimers (1999) and Collier (2003) would support Parker-Pearson (1982) and Rugg (2000), who claim that graveyards present an idealized, manipulated social configuration, rather than a mirror of past social realities (cp. Barnett

and Silverman 1979). Further, Gorman and DiBlasi (1981), McGuire (2003) and Burke (2006) build on the assumption that ideology can be identified by certain grave-marker characteristics. Mallios and Caterino (2011) provide an example of related work, proposing changes in grave-markers in connection with socio-economic factors over time, thus providing a typical example of related research and methodology (cp. Veit, Baugher and Scharfenberger 2009). Only Susan Buckham's PhD thesis depicts an early attempt to leave the boundaries of prior research and to link materiality and spatiality via a spatial analysis (Buckham 2000), making a strong case for such an approach. However, her work falls short of the potential contributions a thorough GIS analysis would have been able to offer. This lacuna needs to be addressed urgently.

By the application of GIS software (such as ArcGIS or QGIS) and a newly developed JSON-based data collection tool running on Android devices, it is not only possible to conveniently collect the complete grave-marker population of a graveyard, as well as all of the material and linguistic features, but also the precise spatial relationship to each other. Such a toolset for data collection and analysis allows analyzing materiality and spatiality in interrelation over the full chronological dimension of a graveyard. Hence, by applying this digital and spatial approach to this established field of research, a completely new and much more extensive perspective can be gained, which might also invite revisiting already published data.

The preliminary results to be presented in this paper indicate surprising "neighboring and emulation" effects regarding the choice of material and design of grave-markers that so far could only have been hypothesized (e.g. Cannon et al. 1989; Tarlow 1999, 2005, 2012). Thus, in addition to a methodological blue-print, this article is verifying the successful application of digital humanities to an established field of study which otherwise might fail to produce new and controversial results.

References

- Barnett, S. and Silverman, M.G. (1979) *Ideology and everyday life*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Buckham, Susan (2000) *Meeting one's maker: Commemoration and consumer choice in York cemetery*, PhD thesis, York: University of York.
- Burke, H. (2006) Ideology and the material culture of death. In M. Hall and S.W. Silliman (eds.) *Historical Archaeology*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 128-146.
- Cannon, A. et al. (1989) 'The historical dimension in mortuary expressions of status and sentiment', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (4), pp. 437-458.
- Collier, C.D.A. (2003) 'Tradition, modernity, and postmodernity in symbolism of death', *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 44 (4), pp. 727-749.
- Deetz, J. and Dethlefsen, E. (1967) 'Death's head, cherub, urn and willow', *Natural History*, Vol. 76 (3), pp. 29-37.
- Deetz, J.F. (1977) *In small things forgotten: An archaeology of early American life*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Deetz, J.F. (1996) *In small things forgotten: An archaeology of early American life*, 2nd edition, New York: Anchor Books.
- Dethlefsen, E.S. and Deetz, J. (1966) 'Death's heads, cherubs, and willow trees: Experimental archaeology in colonial cemeteries', *American Antiquity*, Vol. 31 (4), pp. 502-510.
- Gorman, F.J.I. and DiBlasi, M. (1981) 'Gravestone iconography and mortuary ideology', *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 28 (1), pp. 70-98.

- Mallios, S. and Caterino, D.M. (2011) 'Mortality, money, and commemoration: Social and economic factors in Southern California grave-marker change during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 15, pp. 429-460.
- McGuire, R.H. (2003) Dialogues with the dead: Ideology and the cemetery. In M.P. Leone and P.B. Potter *The recovery of meaning: Historical archaeology in the eastern United States*, New York: Percheron Press, pp. 435-480.
- Parker-Pearson, M. (1982) Mortuary practices, society and ideology: An ethnoarchaeological study. In I. Hodder *Symbolic and structural archaeology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 99-113.
- Reimers, E. (1999) 'Death and identity: Graves and funerals as cultural communication', *Mortality*, Vol. 4 (2), pp. 147-166.
- Rugg, J. (2000) 'Defining the place of burial: What makes a cemetery a cemetery?', *Mortality*, Vol. 5 (3), pp. 259-275.
- Tarlow, S. (1999) *Bereavement and commemoration: An archaeology of mortality*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tarlow, S. (2005) 'Death and commemoration', *Industrial Archeology Review*, Vol. 27 (1), pp. 163-169.
- Tarlow, S. (2012) 'The archaeology of emotion and affect', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 41, pp. 169-185.
- Veit, R.F., Baugher, S.B. and Scharfenberger, G.P. (2009) 'Historical archaeology of religious sites and cemeteries', *Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 43 (1), pp. 1-11.