

CEMETERIES IN EUROPE AS PLACES OF REMEMBRANCE AND MEMORY LANDSCAPES

LOS CEMENTERIOS EN EUROPA COMO LUGARES DE RECUERDO Y PAISAJES DE MEMORIA

Norbert Fischer *

Received: 27/01/2021 • Accepted: 07/04/2021

Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.6018/rmu.465251>

Published under CC BY-SA licence

Abstract

European cemeteries have been places of remembrance for centuries. With their spatial structure, their sepulchral monuments and buildings, they report on the changing ways of dealing with the deceased. The burial sites give a materialized expression to the feeling of mourning, the change of which in the course of history is able to show the manifold interrelationships between death, society and memory. They store biographies, mentalities, ideologies, gender relations, social structures and hierarchies as well as regional historical specifics. Cemeteries are classical memory landscapes, as will be explained using the example of European cemeteries in the bourgeois era –also under political aspects–, military cemeteries and special maritime cemeteries of the North Sea coast.

Key words

Cemetery, funeral culture, memory landscape, place of remembrance, burial site.

Resumen

Los cementerios europeos han sido lugares de recuerdo durante siglos. Con su estructura espacial, sus monumentos y sus edificios funerarios nos informan sobre los modos cambiantes de tratar con los difuntos. Los lugares de enterramiento muestran una expresión material del sentimiento de duelo, cuyo cambio a lo largo de la historia es capaz de mostrar las múltiples interrelaciones entre muerte, sociedad y memoria. Reúnen biografías, mentalidades, ideología, relaciones de género, estructuras y jerarquías sociales, así como elementos históricos regionales. Los cementerios son paisajes clásicos de la memoria, como ilustra el ejemplo de los cementerios europeos de época burguesa –también en aspectos políticos–, los cementerios militares y los cementerios marítimos especiales de la costa del Mar del Norte.

Palabras clave

Cementerio, cultura funeraria, paisaje de memoria, lugar de recuerdo, lugar de enterramiento.

* University of Hamburg. Email: norbertfischer@t-online.de.

1. «REMEMBRANCE» AND «MEMORY». A SHORT RESEARCH OUTLINE

Since the 1990s, the terms «memory» and «remembrance» have become key concepts in the historical and cultural sciences. Representative examples are the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Simon Schama, Jan and Aleida Assmann and Harald Welzer on the forms and functions of cultural, collective, communicative and biographical memory (the following after: Fischer, 2016: 9-18).

In terms of definition, memory can be regarded as the concrete, individually or collectively shaped work on the past. The production of places of remembrance –i.e. the work of memory– reveals itself as a form of cultural practice, because it is based on interpersonal communication. The bearers are individuals, but they are interwoven with collectively supported social and cultural patterns.

Here «memory» is to be understood as a cultural storage and presupposes a social consensus on the contents to be preserved. Classical storage locations of a social memory are for example libraries and museums. Cemeteries can also be included in this category, each with its own specific landscape design. In the relevant specialist literature, it has been repeatedly described how important symbolically designed places and spaces are for collective memory.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pioneered research into the relationship between space and memory in the first half of the 20th century. He recognized and analysed the social and spatial bondage of collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs wrote about the «sensual certainty» of material places of memory: «The past becomes part of the present: you can touch it, believe to experience it directly» (Halbwachs, 2003: 14).

Halbwachs' lasting legacy is the realization that memory is both socially and spatially anchored. He saw the material artifacts that remained from past eras as symbolic carriers of memory. Or, to put it another way: That which has survived time in public space as an artifact represents much more than its mere material value: «For the concrete place served as a reflexive point of reference for both individuals and collectives, and as a spatial link and starting point for memory. Spatial and cultural appropriation corresponded with each other...» (Halbwachs, 2003: 210-211).

The concept of «places of remembrance» itself goes back to the publication series of the «Lieux de mémoire» by the French historian Pierre Nora (1984). His concept is based on the historical caesura of the separation of

history and memory: the historicization of society and culture in the bourgeois era, which was not least connected with the beginnings of modern historiography, meant the end of a socially lived memory by creating distance to one's own past. The now institutionalized places of remembrance, however, ensure that the past does not disappear completely, but is no longer practised in everyday's life.

The pioneering concept of «memory landscape» was the study «Landscape and Memory» by the British historian Simon Schama, published in 1995. He showed how relics of the past were, as it were, immortalized in the landscape (Schama, 1995). Under other auspices, Aleida Assmann wrote studies in the history of ideas on the relationship between memory and space (Assmann, 1999).

This has since been exemplified by various themes and spaces. On the one hand, places of remembrance show themselves in historical traces and relics in the landscape. On the other hand, they also emerge in reflective-intentional actions. In the latter case, monuments and tombs are the best-known examples.

They show themselves as the result of a social process that reinvents its memory in each historical period and provides corresponding artefacts with meaning. They do not claim any degree of historical objectivity. Rather, it is the selective work of memory, which is always starting anew, that historically produces new appropriations of the past and materializes them symbolically in objects in public space. This is not a subject to talk about aesthetic standards. It remains valid what American landscape researcher and founder of «Cultural Landscape Studies», John Brinckerhoff Jackson, meant when he said that «even the most unattractive monuments lend beauty and dignity to a landscape» (Jackson, 2005: 31, 37).

These can always be perceived as a «memory landscape» when they are shown in spatial-symbolic condensation. Cemeteries are ideal examples of a socially institutionalized memory landscape with individual places of remembrance.

2. CEMETERIES AS TRADITIONAL MEMORIAL LANDSCAPES

Cemeteries have been central places of remembrance and memory for centuries. With their spatial structure, their sepulchral monuments and buildings they report on the changing ways of dealing with the deceased.

«Memory and death correspond to each other», noted French poet Paul Valéry (Valéry, 1989: 414). In his study on «cultural memory», Jan Assmann also states that death is a «'primal scene' of memory culture» (Assmann, 1993: 33).

The history of European cemeteries can be interpreted as a history of spaces that were originally «empty» and sometimes located far from the gates of cities. In the course of time, they have been structured differently according to the social context and have been condensed by various individual elements, above all funerary monuments, vegetation and buildings. The funerary monuments in the cemetery materialize mourning and memory.

From these individual places of remembrance in the cemetery, a collective «landscape of memory» has emerged in spatial compression. Their analysis refers to social, economic, religious, technical or garden architectural developments and at the same time provides information about the emotional structures and power relations of certain historical periods. It testifies to cultural and social caesuras and distortions, to traditions and utopias. Biographies, mentalities, ideologies, gender relations, social structures and hierarchies as well as regional and local specifics are stored in the cemetery's memory landscape.

The history of modern European cemeteries begins in the 18th century. In the course of enlightenment, reform and population growth, there has been an extensive wave of cemetery relocations since the middle of 18th century. It was connected with a certain practice oriented towards hygienic criteria and determined by burial regulations. Europe-wide models were France and Austria. The burial reforms and cemetery relocations motivated by the Enlightenment produced a number of large, historically significant burial sites: among others, Assistens Cemetery in Copenhagen (1760), Alter Südlicher Friedhof in Munich (1789), La Certosa in Bologna (1801), Père Lachaise in Paris (1804), Var Frelers in Oslo (1808), Melaten in Cologne (1810), Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin (1832). At the same time, the cemeteries were gradually aestheticized (Fischer, 2006).

In the midst of these cemeteries, which were more splendidly designed, the funerary monument became a representative expression of bourgeoisie (and, of course, nobility). It required posterity to remember and appreciate the achievements of life even after death. The bourgeois curriculum vitae of the 19th century saw its mission ideally in the straightforward realisation of its self-imposed goal in life –had its own dream of becoming e.g. a factory owner, a merchant or a scholar come true, immortalisation in the magnificent

tomb was also worthwhile—. In this way it created a kind of secularized immortality. In the magnificent tomb the celebration of the bourgeois biography found its last, stony climax (the following after Fischer, 2001: 27-50).

This was expressed in funerary monuments with their gesture-rich figures, portrait reliefs of the deceased and praising inscriptions. In their language, but above all in the gestures of the grave figures, they fused with an emotionally tinted culture of mourning that understood death as a farewell to a long sleep. The figure of the «mourner» with its melancholy, devotional look, is one of the most conspicuous examples. Standing, stooping, sitting or huddled together, it can be found in many variations. The feeling of parting and mourning was embodied by a special «femininity» –at the same time a typical expression of the social roles in the bourgeois era—. The innocent purity of the «mourner» embodied an almost secularized hope of redemption in the hereafter –at the same time they embodied prestige and prosperity of those buried here– (Götz, 2013).

Parallel to the funerary cult, many urban cemeteries developed into gardens or park-like grounds. In the 19th century the park cemetery became a model of sepulchral aesthetics. The park cemetery formed the appropriate backdrop for a cult of tombs which, even in death, proclaimed the prestige consciousness of all those factory owners or merchants who wanted to be immortalised in the burial grounds. «Tracks of ambition» was the name given to those splendid ways where the most important gravesites were located. At the cemetery Köln-Melaten, the mockingly meant «Millionen-Allee» («Avenue of millionaires») has meanwhile become the official name of a part of the cemetery.

Especially the park necropolises of the bourgeois era offer a vivid example of the cemetery as a memorial landscape. Their function as cultural memory goes far beyond the private remembrance of the dead on the individual gravestones. In the bourgeois 19th century, death, mourning and memory were redesigned in the cemetery space –as mentioned above, based on the model of the English landscape park—. From a social point of view, this landscape aesthetic represents a vanishing point of bourgeois society and culture and bears witness to a fundamental change in mentality. The landscape aesthetic was not only a form of contemplative consciousness, but also a compensation for the lost Christian hope of resurrection and certainty of the afterlife. In other words, «landscape» became an earthly substitute for the lost heavenly paradise in the imagination of the bourgeois age.

In the background was the fact that the declining importance of Christian traditions in the Age of Enlightenment had left a vacuum that was felt to be painful. This metaphysical vacuum was filled by the aestheticization of nature that unfolded through the medium of landscape painting. As a contemplative pleasure, it presupposed the dissolution of the closed Christian metaphysical world view as well as the social domination of nature. As aestheticized nature, landscape became the goal of inner contemplation and contemplation, a vanishing point of visions and utopias, a place of comfort and hope. Under these circumstances, it was suitable to fill the metaphysical vacuum left behind by the loss of the universal Christian worldview, especially the old faith.

The image of death was not only emotionally charged, but also personalized. Portraits of the deceased often appeared, for example in relief. Moreover, the styles of the tombs became more and more diverse. In particular, the historicism of the late 19th century flourished in a lavish style: neo-baroque forms stood alongside neo-gothic and neo-classical –ideal-typical memorial landscapes of the bourgeois industrial age–.

So, in the course of the 19th century the gravestones had become increasingly monumental. The climax was the mausoleum cult: mausoleums, which are considered to be a particularly aristocratic form of tomb, were expensive and were reserved for a narrow social elite. The mausoleums formed the climax and conclusion of the funerary cult of the middle-class age. In numerous European metropolises, especially in the period before the First World War, several mausoleum buildings were erected. Sometimes special rooms of the cemetery were landscaped for the mausoleums, often the houses of the dead served as point de vue within the sepulchral landscape. The mausoleums of the turn of 19th to 20th century reflected the claim to power of urban oligarchies. Having achieved wealth, power and prestige in the historical environment of industrialisation and urbanisation, the upper middle classes sought special forms of symbolic representation –and found them in the aristocratic mausoleum tradition– (Reuter *et al.*, 2006).

Nowadays, the old places of death, mourning and memory are appreciated and preserved. Almost all larger cemeteries have museum areas in which historical grave monuments are presented and explained in a new way. Here memory landscapes are produced on a new, reflective level. So, the memorial landscapes of the bourgeois park cemeteries can still be visited everywhere. They are inventoried and put under protection. It seems as if the threatening disappearance of the hitherto familiar patterns of death,

mourning and memory lends the old cemeteries a melancholy fascination. In the historically interwoven space of the sepulchral, epochs can once again be visited whose culture of remembrance lives on and has an effect up to the present day –it has created a very special «figure» and unmistakable places for death, mourning and remembrance– (ASCE, 2020).

3. POLITICAL ASPECTS

Beyond individual, family and stratum-specific places of mourning in cemeteries, burial sites can be described as social and political «memory landscapes». They store biographies, mentalities, ideologies, gender relations, social structures and political hierarchies. Under a political point of view, one of the best examples is the so-called «Socialist Cemetery» in Berlin. It was inaugurated on 21 May 1881 as the «Municipal Cemetery for Berlin», located outside the city limits. Until then, only the church cemeteries located in the city centre had taken up the burials. Thus, it formed a socio-political counterpart to the church cemeteries with their partly monstrous bourgeois burial grounds. Friedrichsfelde also became the scene of many non-church funeral ceremonies. When famous socialist politician Wilhelm Liebknecht was buried there in August 1900, there was a funeral procession of tens of thousands. August Bebel, Paul Singer, Viktor Adler and other European socialists appeared in the mortuary as funeral orators. After the burial of Wilhelm Liebknecht, Friedrichsfelde became the preferred burial place of leading representatives of the labour movement. In 1926, a memorial designed by the then relatively unknown architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was inaugurated in Friedrichsfelde, commemorating Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and the other victims of the Revolution of 1918/19. It was destroyed by the National Socialists in 1935 (since 1983 there is a new memorial on this site) (Fischer, 2016).

More recent socio-politically motivated examples are the women's burial grounds, such as on the new cemetery in Munich-Riem and on the Ohlsdorf cemetery in Hamburg, which were initiated by representatives of the women's movement. The earliest example in Germany is the «Women's Garden» at Ohlsdorf Cemetery, which opened in 2001. Instead of the classic family or marriage-related gravesite, facilities are developing which are characterised by new social groups with their own social identity –in this case the women's movement–. The «Women's Garden» combines gravesites for members of the

association of the same name with memorials of important women from Hamburg that are displayed in a sort of museum. The complex includes explanatory panels, benches and above all a wide variety of elements of garden architecture and design. In Munich, a separate women's cemetery was created –also by an association– at the new Riem cemetery in 2011. It goes back to a special women's housing project of the self-administered housing and building cooperative «Frauen-Wohnen».

4. MEMORY LANDSCAPES OF WAR: MILITARY CEMETERIES

Let us come to a special case in the history of cemeteries: the military cemeteries. Military cemeteries form war-related memorial landscapes for the fallen. Until the 19th century, however, the fallen in Europe were usually –if at all– buried in anonymous mass graves. But with the First World War, special, systematically planned military cemeteries were established in Europe. Their mostly uniform rows of graves with crosses or steles symbolize the industrialized mass death of the First World War. The military cemeteries initially resembled each other in the Western European nations. They showed uniformly designed graves around a sacrificial cross and a memorial stone (sometimes also around a chapel; Hettling *et al.*, 2013; Mosse, 1990; Willmann, 1980).

As in the history of death and mourning in general, nature, especially trees and groves, plays an important role in the design of military cemeteries and the commemoration of the fallen. This was especially true of German military cemeteries, which were heroicised under these auspices: «In the Heroes' Groves, national symbolism in oaks and erratic blocks was combined with the symbolisation of the eternal cycle of becoming and passing away in nature. Death and renewal in nature referred to elemental forces, which were also attributed to the soldiers on the front lines...».

In addition to military cemeteries, war memorials formed another element of military memorial landscapes. After the First World War, almost every town and city had its own memorial erected (or added new inscriptions to existing monuments, mostly dating from 1870/71). As a rule, their inscriptions transcended the death in war as «sacrifice for the fatherland». Not infrequently, war memorials –like military cemeteries– were erected in cemeteries, sometimes as the centre of a smaller facility for the burial of the fallen other war victims.

If one summarizes these manifold materializations, a condensed symbolism of war memorials has developed in different places. They embody and initiate autobiographical memories as well as –in politically different connotations– social reflections on war and violence.

5. REGIONAL REMEMBRANCES: MARITIME CEMETERIES OF THE NAMELESS

Maritime death has left symbolic traces in the coastal landscape: maritime cemeteries, gravestones and monuments recall the effects of disasters. Through such sites the history of the coast is inscribed into the landscape. They are placed at central locations, for example at the harbour, on the promenade or on viewing points. They are narratives of a very specific regional history and may recall the tragic consequences of maritime disasters (Hasse, 2016; Fischer, 2005).

In particular, specially marked burial places for unknown corpses are characteristic for the memory landscape. The earliest example on North Sea Coast is situated on the island of Neuwerk, which lies in the Mouth of River Elbe. Already on the first historical maps of the island is the «cemetery of the nameless» clearly noted. It was already described in the 16th century by Balthasar von Meinsen. An ordinance of late 17th century states that a tomb with a wooden cross made of driftwood must be laid up for the unknown found ashore. Until nowadays, the graves on the Neuwerk burial place are marked by simple wooden crosses, which record the date of finding. Since the early twentieth century this place has become an attraction for the emerging tourism on the island. After Neuwerk became a seaside resort in 1905, the burial place was redesigned with a monument. The initiative and financial resources to redesign the area came from spa guests.

Let's look on the island of Sylt: On the Keitum churchyard a foundling stands until today with the inscription «the unknown». This memorial can also be seen on photos from the time around 1930 as well as on a painting by the Keitum painter Magnus Weidemann (1880-1967). The picture is from 1933 and bears the title «The Seemannsgräber». The memorial stone can be seen with nine wooden crosses, which are no longer present today.

Keitum's graveyard is a touristic highlight on the island of Sylt. Once Sailors and a lot of captains from Sylt were hired in Danish, Dutch and German harbours on ships for whaling at the Greenland Sea and later for maritime trading to the oversea colonies in Asia and America. Since a lot of

them died abroad or at sea, the dangers of the sea and losing life on sea were main factors of mentality.

Also still existing is burial place for the nameless on the East Frisian island of Spiekeroog. Once it commemorates one of the most serious and famous shipwrecks on the German coast: the Johanne tragedy of November 6, 1854. Three days after the disaster, 28 dead people were found on the beach and buried in this special place. Five years later –after collecting money– the place was marked with a wooden cross and designated as a «cemetery of the nameless».

In the meantime, the musealization of these places is going on. Not least in the sense of tourism marketing they were redesigned in Westerland, Keitum and other places and presented to the public. An outstanding example is Nebel on the isle of Amrum. The corpses of those who were buried here were floated along at the Amrum Kniepsand, a broad beach, which is situated west of the island. The Amrum burial place was donated by Amrum Captain Carl Jessen, the first burial took place on 23 August 1906, the last burial in 1969. In 2012 the space was redesigned and additionally equipped with art objects by the Nebel Parish of St. Clemens. Three sculptures were erected. They are ship symbols, including «The Falling Ship», which recalls the disasters that occurred in front of Amrum.

With these old and new facilities, the coast-specific experience of shipwreck in the public space was materialized. These burial and commemorative places point to the importance of maritime disasters in regional culture. The memorials of maritime death are based on the historical experience of extreme nature and disasters. So, memory landscape can be seen as symbolic condensation of the tragic past and as a part of the cultural heritage of the coast.

The maritime memory landscape thus results from a «regionalisation» of the culture of memory. The social geographer Benno Werlen uses the term «regionalisation» in the sense of a re-anchoring of the human being in a society that is rapidly changing and thus alienated from its own traditions. On the North Sea coast, regionalisation of one's own culture of remembrance means that it is not seen as part of a superordinate, national overall history, but is, conversely, demarcated from it (Werlen, 2007).

6. OUTLOOK: A CARTOGRAPHY OF MEMORY

Finally, let us take a brief look at some other memory landscapes anchored in public space in the context of death and mourning. One could think of those in Europe and the USA, where there are more and more crosses at the roadside, which remind us of road deaths and are sometimes provided with personal attributes and designed like small altars. The road is a space that, like few others, is considered a symbol of the mobile society. These objects can be placed in the tradition of designed space, such as expiatory crosses or plague columns. Indeed, the conquest of public space is revealing for the new way of dealing with death and mourning that has been observed for some years now. Despite their undoubtedly provisional character, the crosses at the roadside have a memorial function.

Such provisional places of remembrance are also known from other landscape spaces. In alpine regions, memorials mark the place where mountaineers died. In many towns and cities, information boards or monuments commemorate the victims of fire or flood disasters. All of these are signs that the cemetery is by far not the only scene of death and mourning, that the memory is always looking for its places anew. If one were to map all these places, one would obtain diverse «landscapes of memory» with very different regional and historical characteristics.

It would make sense to map individual places of remembrance and condensed memory landscapes in Europe. It would be the way to a more comprehensive, comparative cartography of places landscapes of remembrance, which could include regions as well as cities in their own cultural and social context and in certain epochs.

REFERENCES

- ASCE (2020). <<http://www.significantcemeteries.org/>> [2020-07-17].
- Assmann, A. (1999). *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: C. H. Beck.
- Assmann, J. (1992). *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C. H. Beck.
- Fischer, N. (2006). Friedhof. *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*, Band 4. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler.
- Fischer, N. (2016). *Gedächtnislandschaften in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Kulturwissenschaftliche Studien*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Fischer, N. (2005). Tod am Meer. Die Namenlosen-Friedhöfe an der Nordseeküste. In Fischer, N. & Herzog, M. (ed.), *Nekropolis. Der Friedhof als Ort der Toten und der Lebenden*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 147-159.
- Fischer, N. (2016). Neue Topografien des Jenseits: Der Friedhof als säkularisierte Gedächtnislandschaft im bürgerlichen Zeitalter. In Christa Agnes Tuczay et al. *Sei wie du willst namenloses Jenseits: Neue interdisziplinäre Ansätze zur Erforschung des Unerklärlichen*. Wien: Praesens-Verlag, 409-416.
- Fischer, N. (2016). Feuerbestattung, Sozialdemokratie und Geschichte: Bestattungskultur als Reformprojekt der SPD im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert. *Ohlsdorf. Zeitschrift für Trauerkultur*, 133, II, 2016. <www.fof-ohlsdorf.de/133s07_fischer> [2020-07-17].
- Fischer, N. & Herzog, M. (2005). *Nekropolis. Der Friedhof als Ort der Toten und der Lebenden*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Götz, A.-M. (2013). *Die Trauernde. Weibliche Grabplastik und bürgerliche Trauerkultur*. Köln: Böhlau.
- Halbwachs, M. (2003). Stätten der Verkündigung im Heiligen Land. Eine Studie zum kollektiven Gedächtnis. Ed. Stephan Egger. Konstanz: UVK-Verlag.
- Hasse, J. (2017). *Versunkene Seelen. Begräbnisplätze ertrunkener Seeleute im 19. Jahrhundert*. Freiburg-Brsg.: Herder.
- Hettling, M. & Echternkamp, J. (ed.) (2013). *Gefallenengedenken im globalen Vergleich. Nationale Tradition, politische Legitimation und Individualisierung der Erinnerung*. München: De Gruyter.

- Mosse, G. L. (1990). *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nora, P. (1984-1992). *Les Lieux de mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Reuter, I. & Fischer, N. (2006). Bürgerliche Nobilitierung durch sepulkralen Aristokratismus: Mausoleen auf dem Madrider Friedhof San Isidro. In B. Borngässer, H. Karge & B. Klein (ed.), *Grabkunst und Sepulkralkultur in Spanien und Portugal. Arte funerario y cultura sepulcral en España y Portugal*. Frankfurt-M., Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial, Vervuert, 497-515.
- Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and Memory*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Werlen, B. (2007). Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierungen 2: *Globalisierung, Region und Regionalisierung*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner.
- Valéry, P. (1989). Cahiers/Hefte, Band 3. Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer.
- Willmann, G. (1980). *Kriegsgräber in Europa. Ein Handbuch*, München: C. Bertelsmann.

