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Jewish Memorial Practice

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TWELFTH TO SIXTEENTH CENTURIES

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The early secular use of cemeteries is well attested in written sources too. Almost everywhere in France there are documents that cite the presence of inhabited dwellings in eleventh-twelfth century graveyards. In certain dioceses, such as Normandy, the bishops already attempted to limit domestic occupation in cemeteries to providing asylum in times of war. But elsewhere in the west of France, and in particular in the ecclesiastical province of Tours, permanent settlement was encouraged, and whole villages were sometimes constructed with the active participation of the clergy (Fixot & Zadora-Rio 1989).

By contrast, from the thirteenth century onwards one notices a change in attitude among the ecclesiastical authorities, and construction in cemeteries becomes routinely prohibited. The statutes of Bishop Eudes of Sully in Paris from around 1205 threaten excommunication to anyone rebuilding in a cemetery, and in 1220 the synod of Angers forbade the erection of new structures or the rebuilding of any house which has been left demolished for a year or more (*Nullus de novo edificare in cimiterio permittatur; nec domus aliqua si disrupta fuerit, durante per annum ruina, ibi reedificetur*). Similar injunctions were issued at Cambrai, Noyon, Soissons and Tournai, and may be found in England at Norwich in 1240-1243, and at Winchester and Exeter a little later. Statutes issued at Salisbury in 1238-1244 and those at Worcester (of 1240) require that any secular building erected in a cemetery shall be taken down, other than in time of war (Lauwers 2005, 259, n2-6). This tightening of the ecclesiastical legislation runs parallel to the ritual consecration of churchyards, which reflected a growing need to separate the sacred from the secular and led to the gradual exclusion of dwellings and domestic activities from graveyards.

The use of space, as revealed by excavations, is of the greatest value in determining how and when new ideas of community burial were put into practice. In some places, as in Raunds, the new conception of the churchyard, endowed with firm boundaries and exclusively dedicated to the dead, was imposed from its inception in the tenth-twelfth centuries, revealing seigniorial or ecclesiastical control over burials from an early date. In other places, the churchyard derived from less formal, more scattered, possibly family-based local burial-grounds, which were gradually reduced in area by the process of parochialization. This smaller area in which burial was more dense, may in turn have reflected a transformation in the allegiance between the living and the dead, from family to the wider community (Lauwers 2005, 120-132; Zadora-Rio 2003).

PART 3: JEWISH MEMORIAL PRACTICE *by Samuel D. Gruber*

The cemetery

In Hebrew a cemetery is called *Beth Kewarot* - the house or place of graves (Neh. 2:3), or more commonly *Beth ha-Chaim*, the house or garden of life, or *Beth Olam* - the house of eternity (Eccl. 12:5). In Jewish law and tradition a cemetery is a holy place, more sacred than a synagogue. A new community is obligated to designate a cemetery

before building a synagogue. Traditional burial and mourning practices follow precise laws, though actual practice varies. The responsibility to erect a grave marker or monument (*mazevah*) to mark a grave and commemorate the deceased has Biblical and Talmudic precedent, and appears to have been universally practiced by Jews throughout medieval Europe for purposes of commemoration, but also to ensure standards of ritual purity were maintained. Contact with a dead body – directly or at the burial site – was strictly forbidden to men of priestly families (*Kohanim*). In traditional Judaism, except in cases of closest relatives, even being under the same roof with a dead body or stepping over a grave causes impurity for *Kohanim*. This strict law made the visible marking of graves essential.

It is forbidden to use graves and gravestones for any other purpose. Rabbi Moshe Isserles of Krakow even forbade sitting on a gravestone. There are other rules and traditions regarding the care and use of Jewish cemeteries. One should not enter a cemetery bareheaded, pasture animals or collect grass there or run a canal through it. Also according to tradition, a ritual hand-wash is required after dealing with the dead directly and after visiting graves.

Memorials

Based on ancient and medieval finds, it is apparent that Jewish graves were marked in some way, usually with the name of the deceased. This was the norm for ancient burials in the Roman catacombs. Inscribed stone and ceramic markers have been found throughout the Mediterranean region from the Roman through Early medieval periods. The inscribed epitaphs in the Jewish catacombs of Rome were mostly in Greek, with the inclusion of few standard phrases in Hebrew. These inscriptions provide the bulk of the information known about the size, activity and location of the large Jewish community of the ancient capital. The tradition of including funerary inscriptions in languages other than Hebrew has varied through time and place. Today, it is accepted that in Chassidic or Orthodox cemeteries, funerary inscriptions can only be in Hebrew, and this was mostly true in the Middle Ages. But vernacular languages – Aramaic, Greek and Latin and later Yiddish and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) also appear on gravestones.

In antiquity and early medieval Europe, the Jewish origin of the deceased is often deduced only by a Hebrew name. Hebrew language and Hebrew script are not employed. In other cases Jewish symbols reveal the deceased's Jewish origin, and religious practice. For example, early Jewish tombstones from the Roman province Pannonia (Western Hungary) have carvings of Menorahs and other symbols, but Hebrew letters do not appear in this period. On the other hand, the Greek words *heis theos* ('one God'), translation of the best known Hebrew Biblical prayer, often occur.

History of practice

The first Hebrew inscription in Europe (from 688 A.D.) was found in Narbonne, in southern France. It consists of three words only: *shalom al Yisrael*, peace for Israel. There are, however, few free standing Jewish grave markers from before the eleventh century. It is assumed that such markers existed made of perishable wood, or that stone markers were later pillaged and reused for other purposes. Certainly this was the case in medieval Venosa, Italy, where early medieval gravestones are incorporated into the walls of a local monastery.

Since there have been no Early Medieval Jewish cemeteries found, there is supposition that separate Jewish burial grounds may not have been the norm before Christian separation around the year 1000. For example, in 1986, the burial of an apparent Jewish child dated between the second to fifth century AD was found in a Roman-era cemetery in the region of Seewinkel, about 20 kilometres from Carnuntum in Austria.

Substantial numbers of Jewish gravestones from northern and central Europe are known from the thirteenth century on. Most of these are not in situ - they have been retrieved from other locations. In Northampton, England, a single stone fragment is the only surviving such gravestone in England (Roberts M, 1992). It dates from the twelfth century and resembles those from the Rhineland. In Worms, Germany, the oldest gravestone still legible dates from 1076. A stone from 1146 commemorates a murdered woman, perhaps one of the first victims of the pogroms that accompanied the Second Crusade. Others include a monument honouring twelve elders of whom a legend reports that, during the Crusade of 1096, they asked the town councillors for protection, and, on being refused, murdered the councillors, after which they all committed suicide in the cemetery. There are also the tombstones of Jekuthiel ben Jacob (1261); Baruch ben Meïr, father of rabbi Meïr of Rothenburg (1275); the grave of rabbi Meïr of Rothenburg himself (1307), and many others (Böcher, 1958).

In 1996, an unexpected discovery was made by an Armenian bishop who found a number of large inscribed gravestones in a river and adjoining forest near Eghegis, in the Siwniq region of southeastern Armenia. The granite stones shaped into oblong cylinders, with Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions, are the first physical evidence of a pre-modern Jewish community in Armenia. The inscriptions are dated from the middle of the thirteenth century to 1337.

The earliest epitaph in Hungary is from 1278. The monument was erected "at the head of Pesach, son of Peter, who returned to eternity". This stone, together with two later ones, was found in Buda, at the site of the Medieval Jewish cemetery, at the junction of Alagut and Pauler Streets. In Erfurt (Germany), the oldest surviving gravestones date to the thirteenth century. Only in a few places such as Worms (Germany) and to a lesser extent Barcelona (Spain) are medieval gravestones still intact and in their original position. In the Czech Republic, Poland and Ukraine gravestones from the thirteenth century on are still fairly common despite widespread destruction during the Second World War and subsequently under Communism, when tens of thousands of gravestones - many finely carved works of art - were removed and (presumably) destroyed.

Jewish tombstone from 16th century Italy (Bologna Museum; photo: Giovanni D'Orto 2003). **Fig 12.13**



Excavations in Prague (Czech Republic) at the Jewish cemetery at Vladislavova Street and excavations at Tarrega (Spain), both showed evidence of extreme violence. In Prague archaeologists discovered a mass grave with human and animal bones that showed signs of violent executions with signs of extreme heat. In Tarrega, 159 individual graves and six mass graves were excavated and the mass graves dated through coins to the mid-fourteenth century, thus probably linked to the known pogroms of 1348. Anthropological study of the human remains, which included women, children and elderly individuals, revealed signs of violence, confirming that the identification with pogrom victims.

By 1600, Jewish gravestones were commonly carved in stone and included carefully composed epitaphs finely inscribed (Fig 12.13). The most elaborate gravestones of the period included intricate architectural and decorative borders, and beginning in the sixteenth century, the inclusion of pictorial elements, mostly symbolic, but occasionally narrative. Of course, we cannot know how many wooden markers were made and have subsequently disappeared. From later practice, we assume that markers in wood for poorer community members, or in those places where stone was rare and expensive, remained common. The opening of a new cemetery was often made necessary by minor or major epidemics. As old cemeteries were enclosed with buildings, authorities ordered the communities to found a new one, or they themselves designated its place.