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Family research is one hobby that has the power to provoke in us the need to know more about our ancestors and their lives. But why has it become almost an obsession? Perhaps because this is our chance to truly become detectives. We are searching for the secrets and passions of our ancestors, and perhaps we are even learning more about ourselves in the process.

The research involved in genealogy eventually leads to cemetery visits and tombstone reading. What was once considered a morbid pastime has become a normal part of the investigative process for the family history researcher.

Cemeteries can tell us much about our ancestors. Information can be gleaned from the words carved on headstones. We can learn a great deal concerning family relationships from the placement of a grave within the cemetery itself.

As more and more researchers venture into cemeteries to seek out ancestral graves, questions arise about the meanings of the artwork and symbols found on the tombstones. The researcher wants to know what a symbol might mean and if the meaning of the symbol might provide more clues about this ancestor and his life, ideals, associations, etc. Can reading and understanding these symbols help us gauge and unravel some quintessential element of this ancestor's life?

Understanding the Symbols

The task of interpreting the symbols on a tombstone is a daunting one. Though most symbols engraved on a stone have a textbook meaning, it is possible that the particular item you find engraved on the tombstone is there simply because someone liked the look of it. Therefore, it will have no meaning beyond the taste of the deceased (if that person requested what was on the stone) or the preferences of those who choose the stone's appearance. The point is, many people who choose grave motifs have no idea that the ornamentation they select has meaning. What they do know is that they like the design and feel it is just somehow right. Also, the ideas of the person designing the monument cannot be known to us, so the true representation may never be ascertained.

At the same time, symbols can express ethnic identity, religious affiliation, association membership, or simply the predilection of the time or community. A symbol that was commonly used in one area might mean something completely different in another area. Therefore, it is important to understand the history of the area or of the time.

During your visit to the cemetery, you may or may not be able to interpret the meaning of the symbol on gravestones. Either way, you will enjoy the inherent beauty and workmanship involved in carving these intricate designs. Cemetery engravings are art in the truest sense of the word. The stonecutter was an artist, and some of the sculptures you'll find in cemeteries are as beautiful as art found in the finest museums.

Art and Meanings

Mortality

Arrow—mortality

Broken column—decay, loss of family head

Broken ring—severed family circle

Candle being snuffed—loss of life

Coffin–mortality
Figure with dart–mortality
Grim reaper–death personified
Hourglass–time has run out
Scythe–death cuts us down
Skull, crossed bones–death
Spade, crossed spade and shovel–death

Religious

Angels–spirituality and tomb guarding
Holy books (1)–Christianity
Chalice–sacraments
Cherub–angelic innocence
Crescent–Islam
Crown–glory of life after death
Cross–faith (There are many different types of crosses, and each may represent something different. For a good explanation of the various types of crosses, see a part of the [City of the Silent](#) web site.
Heart (sacred)–suffering of Christ
Menorah–Judaism
Star of David–Judaism

Plants

Fruits–eternal plenty
Full rose–death in the prime of life
Ivy–friendship and immortality
Laurel–worldly accomplishment and heroism
Lily–innocence and purity, the virgins' flower
Morning glory–beginning of life
Oak, oak leaves, and acorn–power, authority, or victory (Often seen on military tombs.)
Palm branch–victory and rejoicing
Poppy–eternal sleep
Roses–completion, brevity of earthly existence
Rosemary–remembrance
Thistle–remembrance, or Scottish descent

Trees

Tree–life
Sprouting tree–life everlasting
Tree trunk–brevity of life
Stones shaped like tree stumps–Woodman of the World
Weeping willow–perpetual mourning, grief
Wheat strands or sheaves–divine harvest

Hands

Hand, pointing upward–pathway to heaven
Hands, clasped–farewells or the bond of marriage
Hands, praying–asking God for eternal life
Hands, blessing–blessing for those left behind
Harp–praise to God

Heart—love
Joined hearts—marriage
Rod or staff—comfort for the bereaved
Stars and stripes around eagle—eternal vigilance and liberty (Often seen on military tombs.)
Urn with flame—undying remembrance

Animals

Birds—eternal life, resurrection
Butterfly—short life
Dog—good master worthy of love
Dove—innocence, peace
Lamb—innocence, usually a child's grave
Lion—courage, eternal guarding
Rooster—awakening, resurrection

Resurrection, Eternal Life, Immortality

Angel, flying or trumpeting—rebirth, resurrection
Bird (dove) or bird flying—eternal life, resurrection
Cross—resurrection
Flame, light, lamp, torch—immortality of the spirit, resurrection
Garland or wreath—saintliness, glory, victory in death
Horns—resurrection
Ivy—immortality
Rooster—awakening, resurrection
Star—death could not overpower the light
Sun—light, warmth, renewed life, life everlasting
Trumpeters—harbingers of the resurrection
Urn—immortality (The storing of the vital organs was of extreme importance to the ancient Egyptians who believed that life would be restored through the vital organs placed in the urn.)

Trade and Occupation

Anchor, sextant, or cross staff—mariner
Axe, steel knife, or cleaver—butcher
Bible—minister
Bowl and razor—barber
Compasses—shipwright
Coulter (hoe), flail (threshing implement)—farmer
Crossed swords—military, high rank
Crown, hammer, anvil—blacksmith
Leather cutter's knife, nippers, or awl—shoemaker
Loom, shuttle, or stretchers—weaver
Open book—teacher
Rake and spade—gardener
Scales—merchant
Stalk of corn—farmer
Swingletree (rod for beating flax)—farmer
Wedge and level—mason
Wheel—wheelwright

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