

The Archeology of Science within Gravestone Epitaphs. Continuing to connect our Spiritual Ancestors."



A **headstone**, **tombstone**, or **gravestone** is a stele or marker, usually stone, that is placed over a grave. They are traditional for burials in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions, among others. In most cases they have the deceased's name, date of birth, and date of death inscribed on them, along with a personal message, or prayer, but they may contain pieces of funerary art, especially details in stone relief. In many parts of Europe in-setting a photograph of the deceased in a frame is very common.

The stele (plural stelae), as it is called in an archaeological context, is one of the oldest forms of funerary art. Originally, a tombstone was the stone lid of a stone coffin, or the coffin itself, and a gravestone was the stone slab that was laid over a grave. Now all three terms are also used for markers placed at the head of the grave. Some graves in the 18th century also contained footstones to demarcate the foot end of the grave. This sometimes developed into full kerb sets that marked the whole perimeter of the grave. Footstones were rarely annotated with more than the deceased's initials and year of death, and sometimes a memorial mason and plot reference number. Many cemeteries and churchyards have removed those extra stones to ease grass cutting by machine mower. Note that in some UK cemeteries the principal, and indeed only, marker is placed at the *foot* of the grave.

Graves, and any related memorials are a focus for mourning and remembrance. The names of relatives are often added to a gravestone over the years, so that one marker may chronicle the passing of an entire family spread over decades. Since gravestones and a plot in a cemetery or churchyard cost money, they are also a symbol of wealth or prominence in a community. Some gravestones were even commissioned and erected to their own memory by people who were still living, as a testament to their wealth and status. In a Christian context, the very wealthy often erected elaborate memorials within churches rather than having simply external gravestones. Crematoria frequently offer similar alternatives to families who do not have a grave to mark, but who want a focus for their mourning and for remembrance. Carved or cast commemorative plaques inside the crematorium for example may serve this purpose.

A cemetery may follow national codes of practice or independently prescribe the size and use of certain materials, especially in a conservation area. Some may limit the placing of a wooden memorial to six months after burial, after which a more permanent memorial must be placed. Others may require stones of a certain shape or position to facilitate grass-cutting by m, or hand-held cutters. Headstones of granite, marble and other kinds of stone are usually created, installed, and repaired by monumental masons. Cemeteries require regular inspection and maintenance, as stones may settle, topple and, on

rare occasions, fall and injure people;^[1] or graves may simply become overgrown and their markers lost or vandalised.

Restoration is a specialized job for a monumental mason. Even overgrowth removal requires care to avoid damaging the carving. For example, ivy should only be cut at the base roots and left to naturally die off, never pulled off forcefully. Many materials have been used as markers.

Stone

Fieldstones. The earliest markers for graves were natural fieldstone,^[citation needed] some unmarked and others decorated or incised using a metal awl. Typical motifs for the carving included a symbol and the deceased's name and age.

- **Granite.** Granite is a hard stone and requires skill to carve by hand. Modern methods of carving include using computer-controlled rotary bits and sandblasting over a rubber stencil. Leaving the letters, numbers and emblems exposed on the stone, the blaster can create virtually any kind of artwork or epitaph.
- **Marble and limestone.** Both limestone and marble take carving well. Marble is a recrystallised form of limestone. The mild acid in rainwater can slowly dissolve marble and limestone over time, which can make inscriptions unreadable. Portland stone was a type of limestone commonly used in England—after weathering, fossiliferous deposits tend to appear on the surface. Marble became popular from the early 19th century, though its extra cost limited its appeal.
- **Sandstone.** Sandstone is durable, yet soft enough to carve easily. Some sandstone markers are so well preserved that individual chisel marks are discernible, while others have delaminated and crumbled to dust. Delamination occurs when moisture gets between the layers of the sandstone. As it freezes and expands the layers flake off. In the 17th century, sandstone replaced field stones in Colonial America. Yorkstone was a common sandstone material used in England.
- **Slate.** Slate can have a pleasing texture but is slightly porous and prone to delamination. It takes lettering well, often highlighted with white paint or gilding.

History Of Gravestones

Gravestones are also known as grave markers, headstones, and tombstones. In earlier times when there were no cemeteries, people used to have burial plots near their family homes.

These graves were usually marked with rough stones, rocks, or wood, apparently, as a way to keep the dead from rising.

They were mostly marked with the deceased's name, age, and year of death. Gradually, churchyard burials evolved involving large, square-shaped tombstones prepared from slate (1650-1900) or sandstone (1650-1890). The inscriptions carved on slate used to be shallow yet readable.

Public cemeteries evolved in the 19th century. Eventually, people started giving importance to the gravestones, headstones, footstones, etc. as a means to memorialize the dead.

Thus, they started engraving the headstones with a small epitaph or a few words about the deceased whether written by the individual himself or by someone else. Plus, they bore details like the date of birth and date of death of the departed loved one.

The greatest advantage of this tradition is that by reading the inscription on a gravestone, one can derive information about the deceased and trace out his or her family history.

Alexander Pope, for instance, eulogized Sir Isaac Newton with the following couplet:

“Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night:
God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was light.”

The Victorian era (1837-1901) greatly emphasized customs and practices associated with death. So, the period paved way for elaborate tombstones and headstones. The cemeteries appeared more like parks as they had such lavish and decorated gravestones.

In addition, the gravestones also included sculptured designs, artwork and symbols such as:

- angels of death
- star of David
- the Dove
- Egyptian symbol Ankh
- Eye of Horus
- weeping willow tree
- maple leaf
- flowers
- horseshoe
- sword
- broken column

These symbols denoted religious beliefs, social class, occupation, and several other aspects of the life of the deceased.

Unlike these, most tombstone symbols from the Colonial period reflected fear of afterlife as they believed that only a few people would be allowed in the Heaven after death and the rest would be categorized as sinners.

Check out some styles of gravestones popular from 1800-1900 here. Moreover, you can visit this page to find out more about Victorian cemeteries and funeral monuments.

Besides, you can get information about History of Government Furnished Headstones and Markers from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website.

Interestingly, in the 18th century, there emerged a short-lived burial practice of covering the graves with iron cages (mortsafes).

This strange practice, though, died out by the end of the Victorian era. The most popular materials for gravestones during this era were marble (1780-1930), granite (1860-until date), iron, and wood. Earlier, gravestones were used only by the middle and upper classes. However, after the emergence of the new Protestant theology, even lower classes started using grave markers for commemorating the life of a departed loved one.

The term gravestone, by the way, emerged from a Jewish custom in which the visitors to a grave used to place stones at the head as a way to honor the deceased.

This custom, in turn, was inspired from an incident wherein a Jew broke the Sabbath in order to write a note so as solve a crime.

Later, he felt guilty for the act, even though it was necessary. Thus, after thorough contemplation, he decided that his grave should be 'stoned' after his death. So, the tradition of placing stones on a grave became popular.

LIST OF GRAVESTONE SYMBOLS AND THEIR MEANINGS

While visiting a cemetery, you can notice a wide variety of gravestones also known as headstones. You will not only be amazed by the different types of gravestones but you will also be wondering about the meanings of the designs and symbols carved on the gravestones. **These symbols have special meanings and indicate the viewpoint of the society in regards to life and death at different points of time.**

While some the symbols present in gravestones have fairly simple interpretations, it is not always easy to determine their meaning and significance on your own. **People have studied in details about the symbols to come to a concrete conclusion.**

Here is a small list of some common gravestone symbols along with their meanings:

Alpha and Omega – These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and it symbolizes the beginning and the end.

Anchor – It is a symbol of well-grounded hope, steadfastness or eternal life.

Angel – It symbolizes a guide to Heaven.

Arch – It symbolizes the passage to heaven or victory over death.

Arrow – It symbolizes mortality or martyrdom.

Beehive – It symbolizes domestic virtue, faith, education and human industry.

Bell – It symbolizes religious faith or religion.

Bird – It symbolizes eternal life, peace and spirituality.

Boat – It symbolizes a voyage or journey to the other side.

Book or Bible – It symbolizes knowledge, open heart, or the deceased's lifetime accomplishments.

Buds – It symbolizes renewal of life or the loss of a young soul.

Butterfly – It symbolizes resurrection or early death.

Candle – It symbolizes the spirit of the soul.

Cross – It symbolizes faith and eternity.

Corn – It symbolizes rebirth and fertility.

Circle – It symbolizes eternal life.

Crown – It symbolizes glory of life after death.

Column – It symbolizes the noble life of the deceased or the head of the family.

Coffin – It symbolizes mortality and death.

Clock – It symbolizes the passage of time.

Dove – It symbolizes innocence, love, affection and purity.

Drapery – It symbolizes mourning and mortality.

Daisy – It symbolizes innocence of a child.

Dog – It symbolizes loyalty, fidelity and vigilance.

Dogwood – It symbolizes resurrection, divine sacrifice and eternal life.

Dragon – It symbolizes Imperial Power.

Eagle – It symbolizes that the deceased was a veteran.

Easter lily – It symbolizes purity and chastity.

Female figure – It symbolizes sorrow and grief.

Finger (pointing upward) – It symbolizes the pathway to Heaven.

Fish – It symbolizes spiritual nourishment, faith, or Christianity.

Flower – It symbolizes immortality or fragility of life.

Flying bird – It symbolizes rebirth.

Flame – It symbolizes life or resurrection.

Fruit – It symbolizes eternity.

Fern – It symbolizes humility and sincerity.

Garland – It symbolizes victory over death.

Grim Reaper – It symbolizes inevitability of death.

Gate – It symbolizes the passage from earth to heaven.

Harp – It symbolizes praise to God and hope.

Horns – It symbolizes resurrection.

Hammer – It symbolizes the power of creation.

Horse – A white horse represents good, while a black horse represents evil.

Hourglass – It symbolizes passage of time.

Hands (Clasped) – It symbolizes farewell and the hope of meeting again in eternity.

Hand (Pointing up) – It symbolizes the pathway to Heaven.

Heart – It symbolizes love, devotion, joy, and mortality.

Ivy – It symbolizes friendship, eternal life and immortality.

Knot – It symbolizes marriage and unity.

Lily – It symbolizes purity, chastity and resurrection.

Lily of the Valley –It symbolizes rebirth, innocence, purity and virginity.

Lamp – It symbolizes wisdom and faithfulness.

Lamb – It symbolizes innocence.

Laurel – It symbolizes the ‘evergreen’ memory of the deceased or victory over death.

Lion – It symbolizes strength and courage.

Lotus – It symbolizes purity, creation and rebirth.

Moon – It symbolizes death, rebirth, or victory.

Myrtle leaves – It symbolizes undying love and peace.

Morning Glory –It symbolizes beginning of life along with beauty, youth, and love.

Oak Leaf – It symbolizes long life, strength, endurance, faith and virtue.

Owl – It symbolizes wisdom and watchfulness.

Ox – It symbolizes patience and strength.

Olive Branch – It symbolizes peace, fruitfulness, forgiveness, purification, humanity and victory.

Palm – It symbolizes success, victory over death and eternal peace.

Plow – It symbolizes the harvest; the reaping of one’s life.

Poppy – It symbolizes eternal sleep.

Pall – It symbolizes mortality.

Pyramid – It symbolizes resurrection, eternal life, enlightenment, spiritual attainment.

Rosary –It symbolizes devotion of the deceased towards God.

Rosemary – It symbolizes remembrance.

Rainbow – It symbolizes union or fulfillment of the promise of resurrection.

Rabbit –It symbolizes humility, gentleness and self-sacrifice.

Rose –It symbolizes love, beauty, victory, triumph, and purity.

Rooster – It symbolizes awakening, vigilance and resurrection.

Scroll – It symbolizes life and time.

Shell – It symbolizes Baptism or rebirth.

Ship – It symbolizes the church or a life on the sea like that of a fisherman or other sailor.

Skull – It symbolizes death and mortality.

Star – It symbolizes divine guidance. A five-pointed star represents the Star of Bethlehem, while a six-pointed star represents creation.

Sun – It symbolizes the soul rising to heaven.

Sunflower – It symbolizes the devotion to God.

Sword – It represents martyrdom or the deceased's military service.

Sleeping Child – It symbolizes the innocence of a child.

Skeleton – It symbolizes death and life's brevity on earth.

Scythe – It symbolizes death, or the final harvest.

Sheaf of Wheat – It symbolizes old age or a fruitful life.

Swallow – It symbolizes motherhood or the spirit of children.

Thistle – It represents earthly sorrow or remembrance.

Tree – It symbolizes life or human fragility.

Trowel – It symbolizes mortality and death.

Tree Trunk (Broken) – It symbolizes premature death or mourning.

Tree Stump – It symbolizes life interrupted.

Triangle – It symbolizes the Holy Trinity.

Trumpet – It symbolizes resurrection or entry into Heaven.

Torch – It represents enlightenment, zeal, liberty or immortality.

Tulip – It symbolizes love and passion.

Urn – It symbolizes the soul, immortality or penitence.

Vacant Chair – It symbolizes the death of a child.

Violet – It symbolizes humility.

Wreath – It symbolizes victory of death over life.

Wheat – It symbolizes divine harvest.

Weeping Willow – It symbolizes mourning, grief, sadness, lamentation.

Wheel – It symbolizes the cycle of life, enlightenment, spiritual power.

To conclude, when visiting to a cemetery take your time to appreciate the symbols carved in gravestones. **The language of symbols will help you to understand your ancestors in a better manner.**

Symbols on Jewish gravestones

- Star of David : The six-pointed Star of David, a symbol of Judaism, is frequently found on Jewish tombstones.
- Cohanim Hands – Priestly Blessing : Two hands with outspread fingers indicated that the dead man was descended from priestly stock (Kohanim) who blessed the people in this fashion
- Ewer : Levite pitcher (and bowl)
- the shofar (ram's horn) indicating that the deceased was a blower of the shofar
- deer : people whose name is Zvi, Hirsch or Naftali (deer representing the tribe of Naphtali)
- lion : people whose name is Aryeh, Judah, Leib or Loew (lion representing the tribe of judah)
- bear : people whose name is Dov and Ber.
- wolf : representing the Tribe of Benjamin
- books : an open book indicates the presence of a rabbi, an officiating minister, or just a scholar
- bookshelves : groups of books, sometimes arranged in an open bookcase, or on shelves.
- fish : zodiac sign for the month of Adar
- menorah : one of the oldest symbols of Judaism
- candles : one of the most accepted symbols of the woman. The candle was lit by the Jewish woman. Most of the candlesticks have three branches but there are ones with two, five and more. A broken candle on a gravestone symbolizes an early death, at a young age.

- crown
- tree : A broken tree or branch is a sign that the deceased was young at the time of death
- bird : appears on the gravestones of many women
- grapes : cluster of grapes is an emblem of Israel

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