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ABSTRACT

Many historical and traditional symbols are recorded in cemeteries. The symbols and motifs on tombstones profile individual lives, but they also convey information regarding a society's order, values, religious practices, and realities at the time of the individual's death. The primary goals of this research effort were to identify a variety of visuals found on tombstones, to look for patterns and categories of use, and to attempt to ascertain societal meanings of the these icons. Data collection entailed visiting 26 cemeteries in England, Scotland, and within the United States: Colorado, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Symbols were grouped into several major classifications: (1) shapes and symbols, like various types of crosses; (2) fauna, such as doves; (3) humanoid forms, like representations of hands; (4) flora, like roses; (5) tools and implements, or anything that depicts life interests of the deceased, from golf clubs and automobiles to the cartoon dinosaur Barney; (6) scenes and landscapes; and (7) organizational insignias. Photographs of 24 headstones are included, with accompanying details about the location and date of the headstone, description of symbols and their history, and assessment of the symbols' cultural significance. (Contains 14 references.)  
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# **Life Visions for the Future: Converging Ideas and Images from Sepulchral Visuals**

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## **Introduction**

Augustine theorized that a fire existed within each person and that this fire was collected with intensity behind the eyes. In order to see something, the eye projected the fire in the form of an invisible ray that focused upon the object of interest. A two-way connection was formed that allowed the attention and energy of the viewer to pass to this object and a representation of the object to be returned to the eye. This representation was bonded to the soul of the viewer and therefore could be recalled or remembered. The dilemma for the viewer was the belief that looking at negative or dangerous things could contaminate the soul; however, viewing positive or miraculous objects could be healing to the soul (Miles, 1983). Although this theory is no longer ascribed to as an explanation for the way the eye functions, it is useful when considering historical images and symbols to remember the impact and deep emotion attached to visuals.

Many historical and traditional symbols are recorded in cemeteries. In a manner of speaking, the images found on cemetery markers carry a visual glimpse of a

person's life and the culture surrounding that life. It is very difficult to create a single visual to portray the complex meaning of a life and death, and a variety of attempts are evidenced in even the smallest graveyard. Tombstones, therefore, are important cultural indicators that profile individual lives and contemporary expression (Norris, 1988). The symbols and motifs in cemeteries convey information regarding a society's order, values, and realities at the time of an individual's death. Whether the symbols are secular or religious in nature they are imbued with fundamental ideas, emotions, and memories (Miles, 1985). This study represents a beginning effort to investigate the historical, social, and personal importance and meanings of sepulchral visuals.

## **Rationale and Questions**

The cemetery or burial ground is a remarkable source of information regarding the society it represents. Burial grounds have undergone their own development throughout civilization and changes in a society are reflected by the treatment of the dead. There has been particularly close association between a society's religious practices and the nature and appearance of their



cemeteries. Many early religious and secular practices regarding the treatment of the dead persist in symbolic form on tombstones. For example, during the sixth to eighth centuries it was common to light fires, called "lanterns for the dead" (Aries, 1985, p. 18), near tombs to keep away the unquiet dead. It is easy to imagine that many of the visual representations of candles, torches, and flames found on contemporary tombstones might trace a portion of their history back to this practice.

In addition to symbols that can be linked to current life or past customs, other sepulchral visuals may have no meaning for contemporary society. Still other symbols have so many meanings that it is difficult to suggest a standard interpretation. Some of the symbols on headstones are actually decorations that have been chosen because of personal preference, appearance, engraver's skill, or marketing. Some of the symbols identify the deceased, some are an invitation to meditate, some have meaning only to close friends or family, and some are directed at the passing stranger. Regardless, cemeteries offer a vast source of visual imagery that has been and continues to be intriguing, delightful, sorrowful, uplifting, humorous, and mystifying.

The primary goals of this research effort were to identify a variety of visuals found on tombstones, to look for patterns and categories of use, and to attempt to ascertain traditional, societal meanings of these icons. A follow-up question not addressed in this paper, though underlying the collection of the data, is to determine which, if any, sepulchral visuals appear to maintain an established meaning across time and culture. This paper is very much to be considered research in progress and the data have raised more questions than they have

provided answers. In addition, data are extremely limited in scope. However, it is an intriguing pursuit to investigate "timeless" images that may endure in meaning and speak to future generations from the grave.

### Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Headstones began to appear for common people during the seventeenth century and this study includes gravestone dates ranging from 1666 to 1995. The sampling was very subjective and was based upon availability and time. Data collection entailed visiting 26 cemeteries in five states and three countries. In Scotland, seven cemeteries were examined, and in England, five were examined. In the United States, the data collection included five cemeteries in Colorado, three in New Mexico, three in New York, one in Oklahoma, and three in Wyoming.

Data typically were collected by a two-person research team. One investigator kept a set of field notes while the other took pictures of the visuals and analyzed the headstone. When a researcher collected data alone, both of these tasks were completed by a single person. Selection of symbols and motifs to be recorded was subjective, but researchers' judgment was tempered by readings in the literature and by collective experience as more and more cemeteries were visited. The smaller cemeteries were examined completely, but several of the largest required a sampling collected from the oldest to newest sections.

The sepulchral symbols were then analyzed and grouped into seven different major categories: humanoid forms, flora, fauna, shapes/symbols, tools/implements, scenes, and insignia. Within these broad categories over fifty subclassifications were

established in order to place symbols in meaningful groups for examining similarities, trends, and other characteristics. At the time this paper was written, over 475 different grave symbols had been recorded.

### Results

Generally, the symbols found in cemeteries mourn death, celebrate life, attest to a religious belief, and/or present a specific memory or characterization of the deceased. However, there also are occurrences of humor as well as elements of mystery regarding the stones and their symbols. An arbitrary decision was made concerning which of the symbols to discuss in this paper within the limitations of space and time. An attempt was made to represent some of the more significant and interesting symbols collected during this study. The following sections identify each of the major categories of visuals, present a general description of a specific symbol within that category including some of the traditional meanings, and discuss descriptive data and sample visuals collected during the field research.

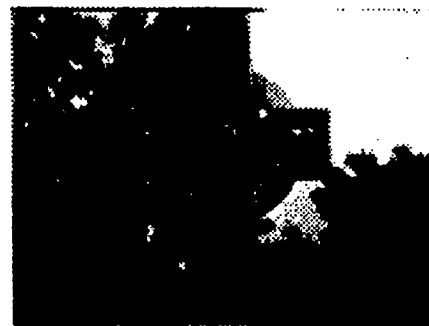
#### Shapes/symbols: Crosses

The cross as a symbol dates from the earliest ages and is one of the most basic images (Liungman, 1991; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). The cross has a number of varying meanings including the number 4 (four points of the compass, four elements, and others), the earth, and a linking or channel of communication (Liungman, 1991; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). The cross, whether with arms of equal length, +, and referred to as the Greek cross, or with an elongated base, †, and referred to as a Latin cross, is most closely associated with the Western world and appears on numerous national flags (Liungman, 1991). Since the rule of Constantine and the legend of

his vision of the cross, over 400 variations of the cross have been associated with Christianity, and the cross is the universally recognized symbol of that faith (Child, & Colles, 1971). As a symbol associated with cemeteries and death, the cross dates back to the seventh century and today is commonly interpreted as a symbol of death when presented with a person's name (Aries, 1985).

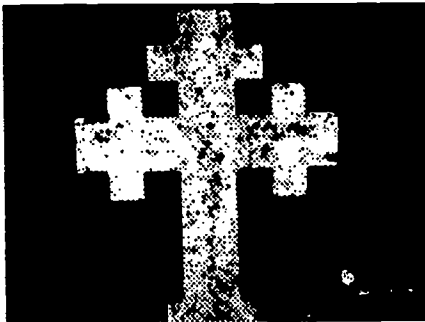
A large number of crosses were noted during this research. In fact, twenty-three percent of the pictures taken at this point in the study have included crosses, and by far, it has been the most frequently used symbol in the cemeteries visited by the researchers. Latin and Greek crosses were most frequently noted, but one of the more popular and elegant crosses was the Celtic

Figure 1  
Celtic Cross



cross, also known as the cross of Iona or the Irish cross. It is normally constructed of stone, and the circle around the crucial point was probably a practical necessity to keep the arms from breaking. Tradition holds that the circle, the emblem of eternity, suggests the everlasting quality of Christian Redemption (West, 1989; Griffith, 1966). Figure 1 is the upper portion of a Celtic cross found at Riverside Cemetery in Rochester, New York, and dates from 1879. The Celtic knots and spirals are a

**Figure 2**  
**CROSS CROSSLET**



common element of such crosses. Figure 2 is a variation of the cross crosslet, four Latin crosses joined together to form a Greek cross. A form of this cross is associated with the Episcopal church (West, 1989). The stone in Figure 2, found over the grave of a male who died in 1881, is located in the Elie Parish Church cemetery in Elie, Scotland. Figure 3, from Riverside Cemetery in Rochester, New York, shows a headstone for a Russian family with the earliest death occurring in 1886. This stone has the form of the cross generally associated with the Eastern Orthodox or Russian Orthodox Church which portrays a slanting footrest and a topmost extension for placing the criminal charges or accusations (West, 1989). This stone also shows the Holy Family and, at the center bottom, a

**Figure 3**  
**EASTERN CROSS**

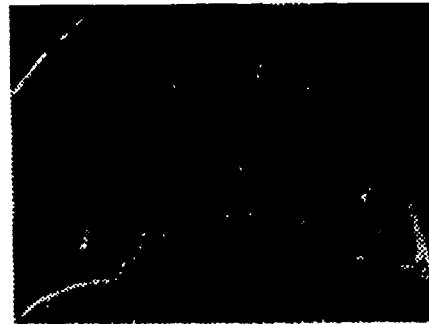


stylized descending dove.

**Fauna: Doves**

The meaning behind the symbolism of the dove is suggested by the bird's swiftness, grace, beauty, white feathers, gentle cooing, and social nature. Some North American Indians regarded the dove as the messenger of rebirth in a manner similar to the dove in the Judeo-Christian story of Noah. In early pagan contexts, the dove symbolized love or the pledge of love and was associated with Venus, Aphrodite, and Bacchus. The dove also came to symbolize the soul, that imperishable or vital part of the human being (Goldsmith, 1929;

**Figure 4**  
**Descending Dove**



Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). In Christian tradition, the dove represents the Holy Spirit, or the third person of the Trinity. This visual representation most frequently takes the form of the dove flying downward or descending, especially with a nimbus about its head (Griffith, 1966; Speake, 1994).

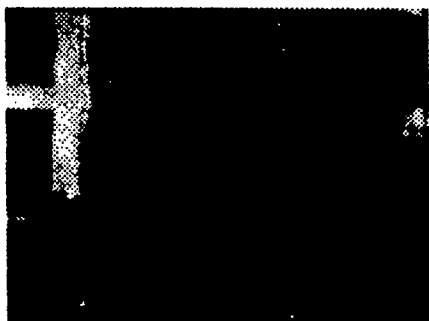
Figure 4 is a picture of a descending dove in relief at the top of a headstone from Kirkpatrick Park Cemetery in Kinross, Scotland. The dove is surrounded by several forms of flora, including ferns and roses, and is an example of the Holy Spirit symbolism. Figure 5 shows the dove flying above open gates with a branch in its

**Figure 5  
Dove and Gates**



beak. This motif is located in Grandview Cemetery, Ft. Collins, Colorado, on a headstone with the first recorded death in 1919. It is a good example of the symbol of the dove as a messenger of rebirth or of the human soul. Figure 6 is another example of a descending dove, but in a stylized form,

**Figure 6  
Stylized Dove**



found on the headstone of a male who died in 1931 and who was interred in the Elie Parish Church Cemetery, Elie, Scotland.

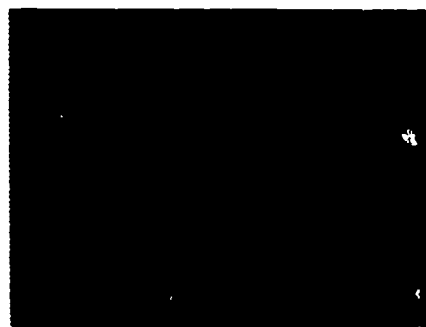
**Humanoid forms: Hands**

Although many different representations of humanoid forms were represented on headstones, the most frequent symbol was that of the hand. This is also true in general, since the hand is the part of the human body that appears more often in sym-

bolic form than any other (Biedermann, 1992). There are many meanings associated with the symbol of the hand which include command, royalty, justice, dominion, blessing, acceptance, friendship, strength, loyalty, prayer, and unity (Biedermann, 1992; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). The meaning varies based upon hand position, hand movement, and which hand is represented. The "Hand of Fatima" or *khamasa* from Islamic tradition is a symbol of good fortune (Liungman, 1991). Within Buddhism and Hinduism, there is a wide array of meanings for hand gestures which generally represent a polarity between the right hand, representing action, and left hand, indicating non-action and wisdom (Biedermann, 1992; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994).

Most of the hand representations in this study derive from Western cultures and Judeo-Christian interpretations. In this context, the hand is the symbol of power and supremacy. The right hand is associated with blessing and the left with cursing. Various hand positions are used to indicate a blessing or benediction. The *Manus Dei* or Hand of God generally is depicted as the right hand descending from above, frequently emerging from the clouds, and rep-

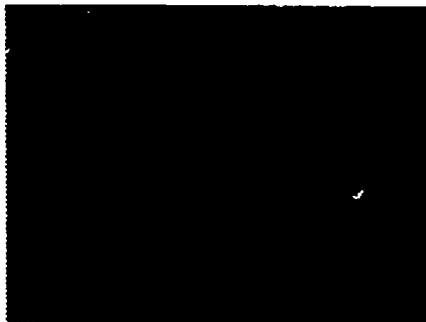
**Figure 7  
Manus Dei**



resenting creation, revelation, and redemption. When the palm of this hand is outward and the hand upright it is seen as the hand of justice. (Biedermann, 1992; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; West, 1989). The Hand of God, coupled with floral imagery, represents the Gardener plucking a "flower," or God "taking" a believer in death.

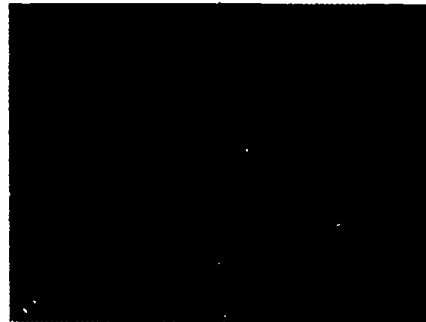
The hand motif in Figure 7 was taken from a stone of a man who died in 1994 and who was buried in the Greenway Cemetery in Laramie, Wyoming. It shows the *Manus Dei* emerging from the clouds to receive the deceased. Figure 8 is from the 1900 headstone of a female in York, En-

**Figure 8**  
**Manus Dei Variation**



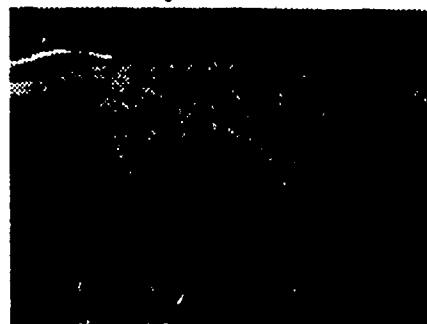
gland. It is a variation on the *Manus Dei* theme with the Hand of God reaching down to touch a human hand. A variant of this symbol is represented in Figure 9, which may be interpreted as the grasping Hand of God, presumably holding that of the deceased, an Irish born male who died in 1880 and was interred in Grandview Cemetery, Ft. Collins, Colorado. This same icon of the clasped hands also was used to represent a married couple joined after death as in life and could also represent the placing of hands into another's hands as a sign of

**Figure 9**  
**Grasping Hands**



surrender and obligation. The handshake also represents openness and acceptance. Another example of the symbolic use of hands is shown on the 1971 stone in Figure 10, found in the Mt. Hope Cemetery of Rochester, New York. Both hands raised and open with thumb and forefingers touching represents the Jewish priestly benediction (Schwartzman, 1993). Two other hand positions should be noted from their frequent reoccurrence in this study. The first is the familiar "praying hands", which was found throughout cemeteries as both a separate symbol and as a frequent position of the hands when a full human figure was represented. The other position is not one that has been explained in the literature on symbols or Christian imagery, but which is re-

**Figure 10**  
**Priestly Benediction**



**Figure 11**  
**One-way Hand**



ferred to as the "one-way" gesture in contemporary Christian culture. Figure 11 is a representation of this hand position and is from a female's headstone dated 1864 in Honeoye Falls, New York.

**Flora: Roses**

The rose was the most commonly occurring flower noted in this study, and its use in marking death has been a practice since antiquity. As a symbol, the rose has many different meanings which include rebirth or regeneration, love, passion and purity, perfection and fulfillment, blood, and spiritual power (Biedermann, 1992; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). The color of the rose often identifies the meaning behind the symbol. For example, within the Christian tradition the red rose denotes martyrdom and blood shed (West, 1989), the white rose

**Figure 12**  
**Red Rose**



is a legendary symbol of death (Biedermann, 1992), and within alchemy the blue rose is the symbol of the impossible (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994).

Figure 12 is a rose taken from a stone in the cemetery in Honeoye Falls, New York. The symbol was above the name of a female who died in 1985 at the age of 69. The rose was chiseled out and the blossom colored red. Figure 13 shows the rose in conjunction with the Star of David on

**Figure 13**  
**Rose & Star of David**



**Figure 14**  
**Rose & Parrots**



the stone of a woman who died in 1993 and who was interred in the Mt. Hope Cemetery of Rochester, New York. Figure 14 shows a rose at the center top of a stone with a parrot on either side. This stone was in the cemetery at York, England, and belonged to a man who died in 1992. These figures are indicative of the representations of the rose symbol which often appeared alone but



commonly was joined by other symbols such as in Figures 13 and 14.

**Tools/implements: Life interests**

Within this classification the following symbols were included: tools representing a trade or occupation, recreational objects depicting possible activity or interest, and any other implements appearing on the stone that appeared to be used to represent the deceased's major interest or activity during life. A wide range of objects appear within this classification. This study has recorded the use of symbols to represent blacksmiths, masons, firemen, pilots, sail-

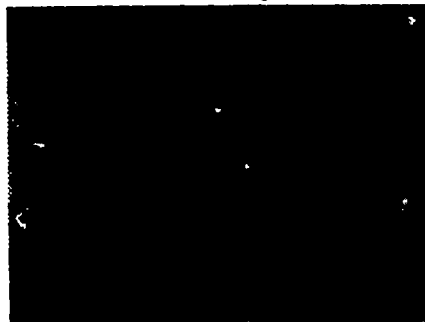
**Figure 15  
Golfer**



ors, soldiers, ministers, priests, doctors, ranchers, farmers, gardeners, hunters, auto enthusiasts, bicyclists, motorcyclists, cricket players, baseball players, golfers, boaters, engineers, animal lovers, homemakers, and fishing enthusiasts. The symbols shared here represent only a small sample but they are three of the most interesting.

Figure 15 is the monument for Tommy Morris who was a three-time golf champion on the Old Course in St. Andrews, Scotland. The stone is located in St. Andrews Cathedral burial ground in St. Andrews. It is sculpted life-sized, mounted in a wall, and dated with his death in 1875

**Figure 16  
Barney**



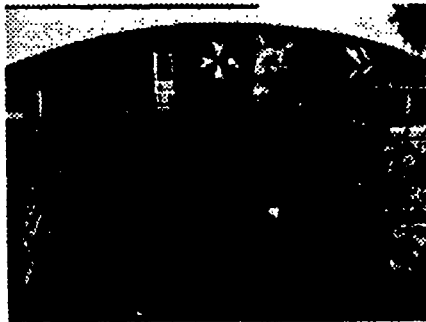
as a tribute from his fellow golfers. Figure 16 is the headstone for a 3 year old girl who died in 1994 that includes, among other symbols, a representation of baby footprints and a color engraving of the Barney dinosaur of cartoon television fame. This stone was located in the cemetery at Honeoye Falls, New York. The symbol in Figure 17 is a three dimensional automobile measuring almost two feet in length. This stone was in the cemetery of York, England, identifying a man who died in 1966. Figure 18 is a headstone, found in York, England, in memory of a man who died in 1990 who evidently was a person of many interests. On the headstone are engraving of flowers, crosses and arrows, a gardening shed with tools, a bus, a trailer, a dog, and a cat.

**Figure 17  
Automobile**





**Figure 18**  
**Life Interests**



**Figure 20**  
**Heavenly Mansion**



**Scenes: Landscapes**

Landscapes are scenic representations of the outdoors that usually take up a significant amount of space on a tombstone and provide a vista of a specific area. Seaside, mountains, deserts, and woodlands have all been noted, and other symbols such as animals, trees, objects, and buildings often are included as part of the landscape. The landscape motif seems to have greater popularity in the more modern stones and to be more prevalent in United States cemeteries than those in the United Kingdom

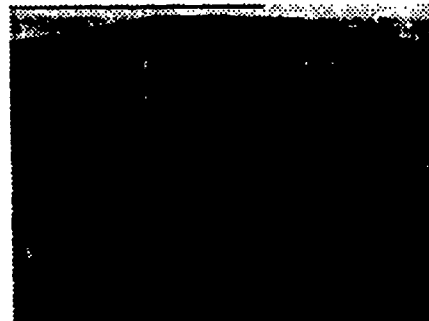
Some landscapes represent a specific locality and are recognizable by those who are familiar with the area. Figure 19 is in Grandview Cemetery, Ft. Collins, Colorado, and the image of nearby

**Figure 19**  
**Horsetooth**



Horsetooth Mountain is recognizable on the stone. Figure 20 shows a landscape that is not real, but rather hoped for by the deceased or the family of the deceased. The scene depicts a heavenly mansion with a lake and swan, painted in color on white-washed concrete. This stone is located in the Mt. Calvary Cemetery, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is for a woman who died in 1935. Figure 21 is an example of a pas-

**Figure 21**  
**Scout Landscape**



toral, quiet landscape with mountains and wildlife. This headstone also displays the Eagle Scout emblem and is located in Laramie, Wyoming.

**Insignia: Organizations**

Organizations specify the meanings attributed to their icons and symbols, some-

times secretly and sometimes using commonly accepted referents. Though a number of insignia appear on headstones, the most common organizational symbols iden-

**Figure 22  
Masonic**

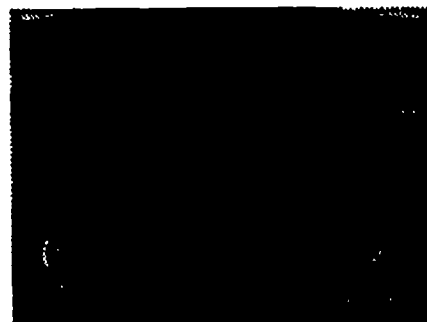


tified in this study were Masonic, perhaps since this organization originated in Scotland where a number of cemeteries were visited. Figure 22 is an example of a Masonic symbol used on a family marker in the Mt. Hope Cemetery of Rochester, New York. Figure 23, also found in Rochester, depicts the seal of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Figure 24 shows the headstone of a man buried in the Greenway Cemetery of Laramie, Wyoming, and the insignia appearing at the bottom of the stone are those of the American Legion, the Union Pacific Railroad, and the Elks (BPOE). Membership in organizations is important in defining some individuals' lives as is re-

**Figure 23  
DAR**



**Figure 24  
Descending Dove**

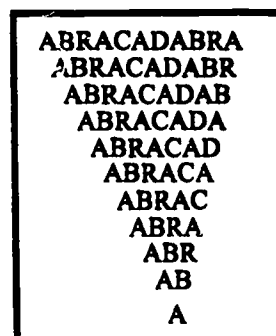


flected in the use of these symbols on headstones.

**Discussion**

A variety of sepulchral visuals are found on tombstones and, in some way or another, visually represent some quality or characteristic of the deceased or the culture of the time. The original meaning of some of these symbols may have been lost or diluted over time. For example, the shape of the common pretzel, although traceable back to ancient Rome, is closely associated with Germany and Alsace where monks formed the dough into knots representing the crossed arms of a praying child. Some pretzels were made large enough to fit over the head and were worn around the neck to ward off evil spirits (Coyle, 1982; World Book, 1992).

**Figure 25  
THE ABRACADABRA  
AMULET**





Another visual charm, the word abracadabra written downwards in triangular form as shown below, was an amulet during the Middle Ages believed to protect against various diseases (see Figure 25). The word was derived from Hebrew words meaning to strike dead with lightning, and its nine-fold repetition and reverse triangular shape gave it strong celestial power (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994).

Just as the meanings of these two visuals have been obscured over time, many of the symbols located in cemeteries and found on the headstones of our ancestors may no longer be representative of their intended meaning. Sepulchral visuals represent the history of people and their society, yet how many of the present generation identify the culture, traditions, and meanings associated with symbols of generations past? Are the symbols selected for use on modern headstones forging new traditions and meanings? How representative are they of current society? Have some symbols assumed such strong associations that their meanings transcend time and culture? As data continue to be collected and analyzed, these are just a few of the questions that remain to be investigated.

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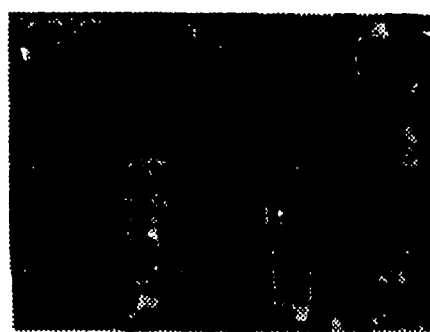
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