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Types of Monument: Historical Analysis

ALTHOUGH man buried his dead at an early stage of his history, with a degree of ritual that could argue some form of magical or religious belief in an after-life, many millennia elapsed before he first set up some form of visible token or marker over the grave and thus instituted commemoration.

Any discussion of burial rites is beyond the scope of the present work, and for its starting-point it is sufficient to notice that the various forms which commemoration has taken since its inception seem to fall into two main categories which, in spite of regional and historic interchanges and combinations, have preserved their essential identities.¹

Prototype of the first is the menhir, whose precise significance is still unknown despite archaeological research, but which probably had a phallic or fertility origin, an assertion of man's abounding vitality, which to primitive minds resided in the stone, investing it with personality, and giving it the character of an anthropomorph.

The second group depends upon conceptions of the tomb as a substitute for the cave or shelter which was for so long man's early dwelling, for the houses and fanes he later built for comfort and worship, or even as a stone replica of a spiritual womb from which he anticipated re-birth.

Primitive beliefs that stones could become the residences of spiritual forces or assume human traits or personalities were also associated with memorials to the dead, and the original megalithic structures devised for this commemorative purpose seem to have persisted as prototypes by virtue of this ancient respect. While it is rash to claim any continuity of tradition between the monuments of prehistory and civilization there often exists a basis of folk-lore and structural resemblances enough to justify comparisons at least.²

In this way the menhir, first as a natural boulder, or with the minimum of artifice, became in civilized times an upright slab or stela, used first in Egypt and attaining a remarkable elegance in classical times. During this period it also took on the form of pagan altar or cippus, the pillar, obelisk and pyramid. At a later date it was consecrated by the missionary with the Christian emblem and changed its form to that of a high cross, finally reverting to the headstone, most ubiquitous of monuments.

In similar fashion, following the bare interment of the corpse in a hole or grave, it was next protected from scavengers by enclosure within a cist or coffin, in the form of a wooden shell or stone chest. In historic times the body was hermetically sealed in coffins of different materials, and buried either beneath a tomb, or placed directly within a sarcophagus above ground. As an alternative, the coffin was interred, leaving its cover flush with the surface. This slab also assumed the rough shape of a body (coffin-slab); or became a simple rectangle (ledger); or was made three-dimensional, in the form of a roof or gable (coped stone). From the coffin-slab carved with a simulacrum of the deceased developed the recumbent effigy, which combined with the architectural structure of contemporary shrines to grow into that flower of the Gothic tomb-maker's art, the canopied tomb. This consisted of three parts: an effigy, the rectilinear plinth on which it reposed, which was given the appearance of a house-body by panelled arcades or niches, and a roof of intricate tabernacle-work suspended above; the complete edifice expressing the conception of the house of the dead with the illusion that its roof had been raised, to reveal the deceased as occupant. This formal scheme persisted after the Renaissance, although the canopy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was made like a bed-tester to convey the notion of the grave as a bed of rest;³ in turn, as the posture of the effigy changed from recumbent or kneeling humility to a heroic stance, it became a military tent or field pavilion.

Apart from ideological significance, monumental design has also been affected by social and economic conditions, and the problems involved in differences of technique and material. It was naturally influenced by the current aesthetic, and particularly by the prevalent mode in architectural design. An obvious case is the classic bias initiated after the Reformation, and the absorption into its repertoire of foreign forms such as the pyramid, obelisk, pillar and mausoleum; others are the

antiquarian reversion to Gothic in the nineteenth century, and later in Victoria's reign the indiscriminate borrowing of ornament from numerous sources.

As the use of monuments spread to the middle classes towards the end of the Middle Ages, their value as symbols of social status led craftsmen to devise substitutes for the more expensive tombs, thus satisfying both the pride and purse-strings of their humbler patrons. In this way, those unable to afford a marble effigy could have one carved in wood or freestone or, more simply, engraved on a brass plate or stone slab; or in lieu of the luxury of a canopy tomb be content with the stone chest which formed the simplest part of its structure.

The prerogative of burial and erection of tombs within churches, which eventually became a common practice, led to an inevitable congestion of space. Although in some cases the local squire or patron continued the medieval precedent of building a private chapel or separate mausoleum for family monuments, the problem in general was solved by statuaries designing their memorials as part of the fabric; the most elaborate were sculpture, grouped within niches, or placed against pyramidal backgrounds in bas-relief, the simplest cartouches or tablets, whose design was often adapted for use on gravestones.

The form of monuments was also affected by imitation of material, whereby wood or metal motifs which originally had some ritual significance were at first literally copied in stone but gradually came to terms with the demands of the new material. Such a process can be seen in the stone imitations of the wooden deadboards that were once indigenous in wooded districts; or the evolution of the headstone from the high cross that superseded the missionary's preaching-staff; and the various guises of the house-tomb—either as a classical temple, a wattled hut, a metal reliquary, a bed-tent or pavilion.

The individual qualities of local stones, and their problems of transport, were also factors which to some extent determined regional differences in form and design. In stoneless districts such as East Anglia brasses were widely distributed during the Middle Ages, as being cheaper and more readily available than tombs in alabaster, while later churchyard stones in this area are often unenterprising in design due in part to the initial costs of raw material. On the other hand, in the Midland zone stretching from the Severn to the Wash, where quarries were

numerous and carriage-costs negligible, churchyard carving was experimental in form and ambitious in size. The available bulk of raw material as dug from the quarry-beds, and its capacity for being sawn or cleft, as well as its relative hardness and texture, which offered the extremes of bold relief or delicate incision, should also be taken into account.

Above all other stones, the beauty of marble led to a wide demand for its use in tomb-sculpture. When the veins of our native marbles such as Purbeck and alabaster gave out, supplies were obtained in increasing bulk from abroad. The competitive prices of marble monuments ousted those in native stone and, being at first largely shop-made by Italian workmen in a debased style which can best be described as wedding-cake baroque, introduced a vulgar streak into our tradition of design which is still in evidence today.

Although the basic types of external monuments were comparatively few, considerable variations, both local and regional, were made upon their themes. Such differences were presumably the results either of individual invention; the collective style founded by workers settled in the vicinity of a quarry, or established in temporary headquarters near some major building-project; or the expression of a communal idiom or local folk-art. As the majority of gravestone-makers and their patrons were rustics, in whom the well of folk-memory ran deep, such eccentricities of design or reversions to archaic forms that occur may well be freshets from this latent source.

(Before analysing in detail the historical development of the various types of sepulchral monument, some explanation of the terms used to define them is necessary. Unfortunately, as in architecture, names have become attached by custom to certain memorials that in the light of more recent knowledge appear mis-nomers. In some cases these have accordingly been changed, although the author, forced to invent others for monuments previously ignored, is put in the same quandary. For the sake of clarity each historical section is headed with its appropriate list of memorials, which are defined in the glossary of terms and illustrated in Figure 1. A brief list of books for consultation is given at the end of each section.)

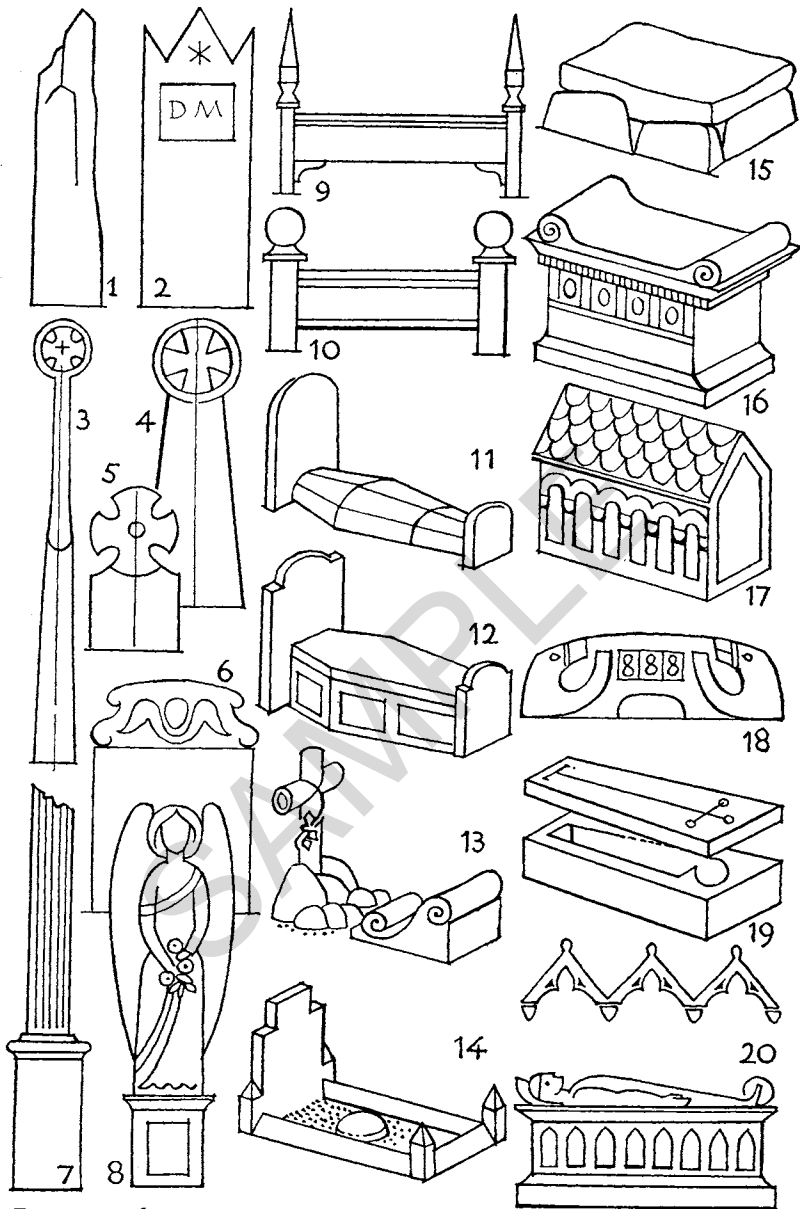
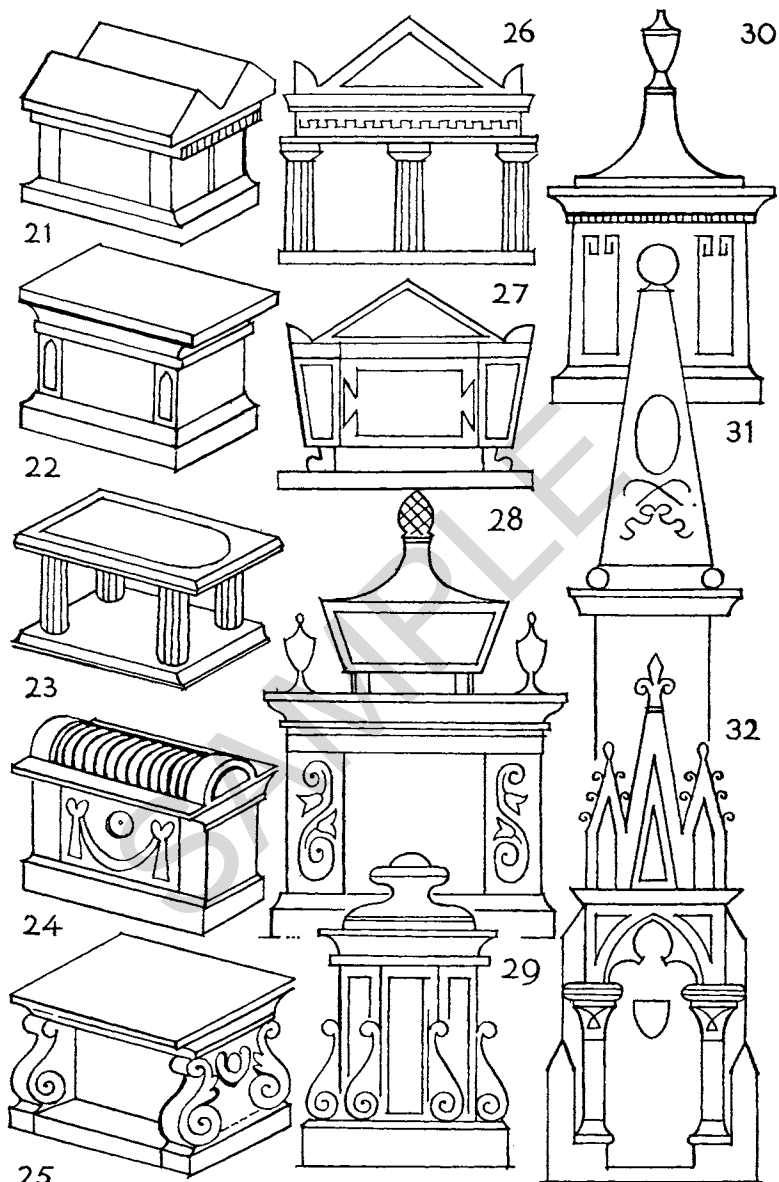


FIG. 1. Development of headstone: 1. Menhir. 2. Roman stela. 3. Anglian high cross. 4. Cornish cross. 5. Medieval discoid. 6. Georgian headstone. 7. Victorian broken column. 8. Marble angel. Development of head and footstones: 9 & 10. Dead-boards. 11. Head, foot and bodystone. 12. Head, foot and coffin-stone. 13. Victorian rustic cross and scroll. 14. Marble headstone with curb and immortelles. Development of the house-tomb: 15. Prehistoric cist or stone coffin. 16. Roman sarcophagus. 17. Romanesque shrine-tomb. 18. Hogback. 19. Medieval coffin. 20. Medieval canopy, tomb-chest and effigy.



21. Midland gabled chest-tomb. 22. Chest-tomb. 23. Table-tomb. 24. Bale-tomb.
 25. Cotswold chest-tomb. 26. Greek Revival house-tomb. 27. Greek Revival chest-
 tomb or arca. 28. Georgian wall-tomb. 29. Pedestal-tomb with urn. 30 & 31. Obelisks
 on base. 32. Gothic Revival shrine-tomb.