

# **Acculturation and Material Representations of Faith in Graveyard Memorialization of German Immigrants in the Wisconsin Holyland**

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## **Introduction**

Gravestones stand as memorials for individuals and families. The symbols and language on the stone are chosen to represent the individual and reflect the beliefs and values of the community in which they were raised for as long as the stone stands. The meaning and range of memorial iconographic elements are informative about the values of a community. Coupling the iconography with the birth and death dates found on the stones also reveals transformations of cultural values.

## **Wisconsin's Holyland**

This study examines a rural cemetery in the Holyland region of Wisconsin for changing religious and secular iconography in a Catholic, German-American community. The Wisconsin Holyland is an area east of Lake Winnebago that was the locus of chain migration from Rhenish Prussia which began in the mid-nineteenth century. The immigrants were from perhaps as many as 17 villages in Prussia all of which were within a few kilometers of one another. It is likely, therefore, that many of the original migrants to the Holyland knew each other in their home country. Once established in Wisconsin, they maintained very close ties and established notably centripetal communities. The communities of the Holyland are all characterized by a common Catholic heritage, residential stability of lineages (as indicated by surname analysis) and high degrees of endogamy (Schlemper 2006; Hastings and Sullivan in preparation). The cultural

conservatism is reflected in the retention of heritage language which persists for more than five generations (Hastings, Sullivan, and Jamison 2014). This cultural conservatism and a robust body of documents makes the Holyland a particularly compelling area for the study of the demographic history and acculturation experience of immigrants during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The Holyland has ten small cemeteries that represent a complete community, temporally ranging from the 1830's to the present. Religious iconographic expressions are found on nearly every gravestone, and patterns of these symbols can be traced over time. For this study, we examined St. Michael's Parish Cemetery in Dotyville, the southernmost community of the Holyland. There are 490 interments in the cemetery at St. Michael's. Many of the gravestones were manufactured from sedimentary rock and are eroded to the point that the inscriptions cannot be read. Nonetheless, 194 memorials were sufficiently preserved to observe the decorative elements. From these decorative elements, we get a sense of the values of the community.

### **The Latin Cross**

We found a large array of Christian, Catholic, and secular elements. The most common symbol is a depiction of a Latin Cross, present on nearly every stone. While an obvious symbol of Christ, the crucifixion, resurrection, and redemption, the Cross has become a simple statement of identity. It is the most recognized Christian symbol, with some slight elaborations between different sects (Keister 2004). Nearly every stone examined at St. Michaels has a cross on it, whether as a decorative element draped in flowers, or a simple cross as a divider between the names of two individuals. While other symbols offer testimony about the beliefs of the

community, the prevalence of the Latin Cross attest to the dominance of Christianity for those buried at St. Michael's.

### **Other Christian Iconography**

Because of the prevalence of the Latin Cross, we've excluded it from analysis. Instead, we focused on the other iconography as elaborations of the central Catholic (and by extension, Christian) faith.

Books are interpreted as being bibles, and are a popular symbol in Christian cemeteries. They come in two forms: open or closed. We do not find any closed bibles in the cemetery at St. Michaels, but we do find open ones. An open bible is thought of as an open heart, receptive to God and the surrounding world. (Keister 2004) The bible is also the Word of God and a reference to the book of life cited in Revelations 20: 15 "And whosoever was not found in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." (*Biblia Sacra*)

Another common Christian symbol was a depiction of a hand. If the hand is coming down, it often is depicted as coming from a cloud and represents the hand of God. If the hand is pointing up it usually represents a sign that the soul has risen. Grasped hands typically represent matrimony. We've encountered this symbol at St. Michael's, but the stone is never paired with a spouse or on a shared stone. We see this symbol as having a different meaning than the common matrimonial sign. The hands are greeting each other in heavenly welcome, or shaking farewell as one departs from Earth (Keister 2004).

The dove is seen in Christian cemeteries of all denominations where it symbolizes purity. In Catholic cemeteries, it is symbolic of the Holy Ghost from the reference in John 1:12 in which "John bore record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode

upon him”. It also represents peace with God, as there was after the Noachian Flood. (Keister 2004)

The lamb is symbolic of Christ, who is both a shepherd and a Lamb of God. The symbol is typically reserved for the graves of children because both are associated with innocence and purity. Every usage of the lamb from St. Michaels—and preliminary survey of the other nine cemeteries in the Holyland—have kept with the tradition of reserving it for the graves of children. None of the gravestones with lambs in St. Michael’s were used for children over the age of 4.

The chalice is depicted in Christian cemeteries where it represents the heart’s wish to be filled with the Holy Spirit. In Catholic cemeteries it represents the Eucharist in which the chalice is referred to in Mark 14:23 “And he took the cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and they all drank of it” (Keister 2004).

Rosary beads are specifically a Catholic symbol. While there is not an abstract idea tied to its image, the actual prayer cycle of the Rosary represents devotion, particularly to the Virgin Mary.

Palm leaves are found in all denominations of Christianity. It is closely tied to Jesus’ triumph in Jerusalem. It is extended to symbolize a martyr’s triumph in death. More broadly, any believer of Jesus Christ triumphs over death, so it is quite commonly found in Christian cemeteries (Keister 2004).

Angels are rooted in the Abrahamic faiths, found in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Angels are more likely to be found in the form of a statue in cemeteries than engraved on gravestones, though we see them in both forms in the Holyland cemeteries. The angel Gabriel is

distinguished from generic angels by his horn, which ‘signals the departure of a soul from the earth and its arrival in heaven’ (Keister 2004). Less common is Michael the Archangel, who presents himself with a shield and sword. He is a defender of faith, but has yet to be found in the Holyland cemeteries. More generally, angels reflect a mood. They are either sorrowful or comforting—whatever expression is needed by the surviving family.

### **Secular Iconography**

In more recent decades, engravings of secular symbols and personal iconography have become more popular. We start seeing complex engravings of the image of an individual, or family farms and houses where they lived. These aren’t necessarily symbols, but images of the person’s life. They are unique to the individual and thus don’t have a greater meaning in expressing a collective identity.

We also see iconography associated with hobbies and interest. Traditionally, deer symbolizes solitude and contemplation (Keister 2004). In the Holyland, it is expressed as an interest in hunting. The deer is never found on a gravestone alone. It furnishes a nature scene, emphasizing the connection to hunting rather than the traditional usage. Fish are depicted similarly, with a pond and rod included to show the individuals interest in fishing rather than the Christian idea of a fish as a symbol of Christ.

Secular iconography becomes popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, but does not replace the religious iconography. In fact, the usage of religious iconography also increases through the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as explored below.

## A Temporal Analysis

Table 1 shows the frequency of religious and secular elements on the memorials starting in the 1870s. Some iconographic features appear and disappear, while others endure for long periods, such as depiction of the Bible, hands, and the Lamb of God. It remains to be seen if this holds for the remaining cemeteries of the Holyland, but preliminary observations suggest the pattern persists.

	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Angel								1			1	1			
Bible				1		2						1	1	1	1
Chalice							1					1			
Dove								2	1					1	
Hands	1	2									1	1		3	
Lamb	2				1				1			1			
Palm		1					1	1				2			
Wheat														1	
Rosary										1		1	1		
Deer												1	3		
Farm													4	1	
Total															
Stones:	14	9	5	11	11	8	18	23	20	11	18	20	13	9	4

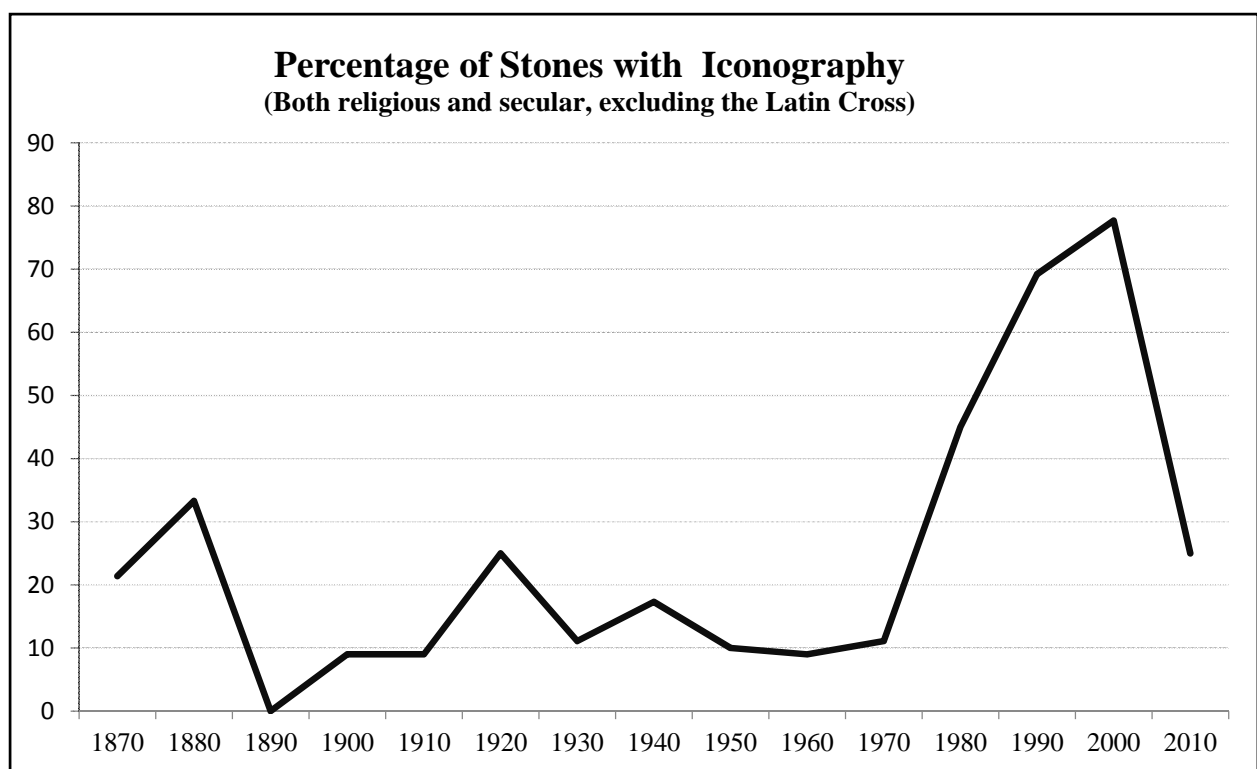
**Table 1: Frequency of Symbols Used from 1870-2010:**

Note that “Total Stones” is the “Total Stones with Iconography”; not the Total of Stones in the cemetery

The sample for each symbol is small and will be expanded with the analysis of additional cemeteries of the Holyland. Still, a sense of the popularity of different elements at St. Michael’s Cemetery can be seen at different periods. Take for instance the usage of the bible. It is one of

the most popular symbols all together, but is not seen in the 1930s, even though that decade has the most stones with iconography. Angels and doves aren't seen on any early stones suggesting they were a new symbol of the second or third generation of residents.

Purely secular memorial stones first appear in the decade of the 1970s. The use of machine tools for carving and incising memorials had largely replaced hand carving by the 1980s. The cost of engravings dropped, and we thus see an increase in the percentage of stones engraved with both secular and religious iconography, as seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Percentage of Stones with Additional Iconography:** Here we see the percentage of stones with iconography increasing starting in the 1970's as it becomes easier and thus cheaper to engrave stones.

The American economy was relatively robust during much of the 1980s and many people may have felt that they could afford more expenditure on a memorial than might have been their inclination in earlier decades. The community of Dotyville is primarily comprised of the descendants of eminently practical German farmers. For the first several generations, there

was little extravagance and many probably felt that spending money on a graveyard memorial would have been unnecessary. This is why we see a lower percentage of stones with iconography in the earlier years, and an increase starting in the 1970s.

## **Conclusion**

The next step of analysis will test all the cemeteries for homogeneity of iconographic representation. We predict that there is likely to be a substantial amount of similarity between the cemeteries simply because there have been so many lineage connections through marriage among Holyland communities. If this turns out to be the case, the final step of the analysis will be to establish iconographic datasets for comparisons with other Catholic cemeteries of different ethnic backgrounds as well as non-Catholic Christian cemeteries of German immigrant groups.

Iconography has been only one facet of what these gravestones can tell us about the culture, history, and demographics of the Holyland community. It has showed us how religious expression has changed slightly over time, and what symbols were used to memorialize the departed. It also has shown a recent change to more secular symbols and more complex engravings. Since gravestones are meant to immortalize an individual in a pithy style, the chosen iconography usually reflects the very core of the culture values of the community at the time, and the stones remain today for us to interpret.



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