



## **Symbolism**

**Acorn** - See "Oak tree/oak leaves/acorns"

**Alpha and Omega** - The first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet, and a biblical reference to Christ, in Revelation, being "the beginning and the end."

**Anchor** - Early Christians used the anchor as a disguised cross, and as a marker to guide the way to secret meeting places. A Christian symbol of hope, it is found as funerary symbolism in the art of the catacombs. It can also be an occupational symbol in seafaring areas or the attribute of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of seamen, symbolized hope and steadfastness. An anchor with a broken chain stands for the cessation of life.

**Angels** - The agents of God, often pointing towards heaven; guardians of the dead, symbolizing spirituality. Angels are shown in all types of poses with different symbolism. Two angels can be named, and are identified by the objects they carry: Michael, who bears a sword and Gabriel, who is depicted with a horn.

**Arch** - The passage to heaven or victory in death. A draped arch symbolizes mourning.

**Bamboo** - The emblem of Buddha. The seven-knotted bamboo denotes the seven degrees of initiation and invocation in Buddhism. On Japanese memorials, symbolic of devotion and truthfulness.

**Birds** - Birds represent resurrection. Birds in flight can represent the flying of the soul. The representation of the soul by a bird goes back to ancient Egypt. Some older burial art features only wings to convey the symbol of divine mission. Often denotes the graves of children. Eternal life.

**Books** - Books remind us that tombstones are documents, bearing vital statistics and epitaphs concerning the deceased. Books may be open, possibly to signify that the stone is a kind of biography, or closed in recognition of the fact that the story of the dead is over. The book on a tombstone may be The Book of Life or The Bible. This identification can be clinched by the presence of a citation (e.g. John 19:14) or an actual verse of scripture. Arabic characters identify the book as the Koran.

**Butterfly** - The soul. It is symbolic of the resurrection of Christ. The meaning is derived from the three stages of the life of the butterfly-the caterpillar, the chrysalis, and the butterfly. The three stages are symbols of life, death and resurrection. Short life or early death.

**Candle** - Candles stand for the spirit or the soul. In Christian contexts, candles can symbolize Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Catholics often leave candles on the grave to show that prayers have been said for the deceased.

**Cat** - Cats can be independent, loving, secretive, mysterious, intelligent, watchful, intuitive, astute, clever, and selective, among other things. Historically, cats have represented different meanings to different cultures. In ancient Egypt, they were worshipped as gods, due to their beauty and gracefulness. Later on, in Europe, they became associated with witchcraft, leading to centuries of slaughter of the feline population, and subsequently the spread of the bubonic plague (the Black Death) in 1347. An image of a cat appearing on a grave marker in modern times would most likely indicate the deceased person loved cats, and possibly kept them as pets.

**Chains** - Medieval thinkers sometimes held that a golden chain bound the soul to the body. Broken links

on a headstone can mean the severance and subsequent release of the spirit from the body. Chains are also the insignia of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, so called because of their dedication to giving the poor decent burials. This association can be clinched by the observation of the letters IOOF or FLT (Friendship, Love, Truth) either inside or near the chain.

**Chalice** - The chalice often appears in association with a white circle representing the consecrated Eucharist. The two items combine to signify the Catholic rite of Holy Communion. The headstones of priests often bear these objects.

**Cherubs** - Angelic. These Angels were sent to guard the way of the tree of life. The name comes from the Assyrian or Akkadian word Karibu, meaning "one who intercedes". Originally they were depicted as the bearers of God's throne, as the charioteers, and as powerful beings with four wings and four faces. In the cemetery they are often seen on monuments for children.

**Circle** - Eternal life - no beginning, no end.

**Clock** - Mortality, death; the passage of time.

**Column** - Represents a head of the family. A broken column can represent loss of the head of the family. A draped or broken column can represent the break in earthly to heavenly life.

**Compass and ruler** - The symbol of Freemasonry.

**Corn** - Can depict the occupation as a farmer. Also, it can represent rebirth, fertility, or old age.

**Crown** - Means glory or life after death. From the earliest times the crown has been a symbol of victory, leadership and distinction. Eventually it became a symbol of royalty. Crowns are often used as attributes of a variety of saints to denote that they were either a martyr or of royal blood. The most often depicted crown in Christian symbolism is Christ's crown of thorns.

The cross with a crown is the Christian symbol of sovereignty of the Lord. When the crown is combined with a cross, the crown means victory and the cross means Christianity. The cross with a crown also denotes a member of the York Rite Masons.

**Crucifix** - A cross with the figure of Jesus crucified upon it is a popular choice for Catholics.

**Cross** - Christianity. Sometimes mounted on three steps, signifying 'faith, hope and charity'. The most potent symbol of the Christian faith, the cross has been used for religious and ornamental purposes since time immemorial.

**Daisy** - Innocence of a child, youth, Jesus the Infant, the Son of righteousness, gentleness, purity of thought.

**Dog** - Loyalty, fidelity, watchfulness, and vigilance. Dogs often appear at the feet of medieval women, signifying the loyalty and inferior place of each in the chivalric order. Modern dogs can imply that the master was worth loving.

**Dogwood** - Christianity, divine sacrifice, triumph of eternal life, resurrection.

**Dove** - Innocence, gentleness, affection, purity. The little bird appears in both Christian (usually Catholic) and Jewish cemeteries, representing some of the same things and some different things in each. Christians and Catholics usually see the dove (which makes its first Biblical appearance in Genesis carrying an olive branch for Noah) as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Jews interpret the dove as a peace symbol. The biblical allusion to the dove also suggests a connectedness with the earth, and its color (white) represents purity and spirituality for Europeans.

**Dragon** - It also stands for the Universe itself, a chaotic force which none of us can truly master. There are dramatically different interpretations between Eastern and Western cultures. In the Orient, the dragon protects humans from evil spirits and represents joy, health and fertility. For the Chinese, the dragon is an emblem of Imperial Power, which has brought the universe into its thrall. But in Western cultures, the dragon possesses the negative traits of the snake, destruction, danger, depravity, and loss of innocence. In Jewish tradition, mythical beasts like the dragon are messianic creatures. Also, a dragon being defeated by St. George depicts triumph over sin.

**Draperies/Curtains** - In the days when the body lay in state in the parlor, it was the custom to cover everything in black. Draperies, with their fancy frills and tassels, are more elaborate than a simple shroud. They allow the expression of mourning to linger long after the body has been taken out the front door and

the accoutrements have been stowed for the next death in the family. Curtains can also set the stage. Parted, they reveal a telling excerpt. What is important in such displays is the main actor or central object of the stone.

**Eagle** - Suggests courage and possibly a military career, symbol for Saint John.

**Fish** - Indicates faith.

**Gates** - Heavenly entrance. The passage from one realm to the next. Passing through 'pearly gates' to heaven.

**Hand Pointing Down** - The hand of God descending from heaven.

**Hand Pointing Upwards** - Signifies the pathway to heaven.

**Handshake** - Represents farewell to earthly existence.

**Harp** - Means praise to God. A symbol of heavenly music, or hopes of heaven. They were often carved with a broken string, representing a break in mortal life. It could also indicate someone of Irish heritage. See "lyre".

**Heart** - Stylized hearts stand for the affection of the living for the dead. Two joined hearts on a stone mark a marriage.

**Holly** - People used to believe that holly bushes protected tombs and other monuments from lightning strikes.

**IHS Symbol** - The IHS monogram is an abbreviation or shortening of Jesus' name in Greek to the first three letters. Thus ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, ἰησους (*iēsus*, "Jesus"), is shortened to ΙΗΣ (iota-eta-sigma), sometimes transliterated into Latin or English characters as IHS or IHC. Sometimes you will see the three letters IHS superimposed on each other, creating a symbol that looks a bit like a dollar sign (\$).

**Ivy** - Ivy springs up naturally to cover English tombs, but Americans who transplanted it to their graveyards decided that it meant friendship and, like most cemetery plants, also immortality.

**Knot** - A tied knot symbolizes marriage and unity.

**Lamb** - Usually marks the grave of a child. The lamb always stands for innocence. Christians go a little further and associate it with the Lamb of God, meaning Jesus.

**Lamp** - Wisdom, faithfulness.

**Lily** - Chastity, innocence and purity. A favored funeral flower of the Victorians. Joseph is often depicted holding a lily branch to indicate that his wife Mary was a virgin. In tradition, the first lily sprang forth from the repentant tears of Eve as she went forth from Paradise. The use of lilies at funerals symbolizes the restored innocence of the soul at death.

**Lion** - Symbolizes the power of God and guards the tomb against evil spirits. Like other guardians, the lion's watch is as eternal as the stone of which it is depicted. The lion also recalls the courage and determination of the souls, which they guard; they manifest the spirit of the departed. A biblical reference to Jesus as the Lion of Judah can be found in the Bible in Revelation 5:5.

**Lyre** - A lyre is the instrument of Apollo. It could also be referencing the harp. These types of stringed instruments are often seen as the root of divine music.

**Marigold** - A large variety, called cempasuchitl, enjoys a special association with Mexico's Day of the Dead; mostly because of its availability in that season. Marigolds not only decorate the graves in the form of crosses and arches, but also form trails to lead the souls of the dead to a home altar set with their favorite foods, photos, and other pleasantries hard to obtain in the afterlife.

**Moon** - Rebirth. A crescent moon and star symbol is also a symbol of Islam.

**Music** - Usually found on the graves of musicians. The music can be from a song the musician wrote, or it could be the deceased person's favorite hymn.

**Oak tree/oak leaves/acorns** - The oak tree can symbolize hospitality, stability, strength, honor, eternity, endurance, liberty. It is believed to have been the tree from which Jesus Christ's cross was made. In smaller pioneer cemeteries, it is common to place children's graves near oak trees. The oak tree was the tree of life in pre-Christian times. Oak leaves and acorns can symbolize maturity or to live to a ripe old age. Twin acorns can represent truth and the power of the spirit that is obtained by two sources - the natural world and the world that waits to be revealed. The oak, oak leaves and acorn can stand for power,

authority or victory. Often seen on military tombs.

**OES, 5-pointed star** - Order of the Eastern Star, the largest fraternal organization in the world to which both women and men may belong. A woman must be related by birth or marriage to a Mason in order to become a member of OES, and a man must be a Mason to join.

**Palette and brushes** - Usually found on artists' gravestones.

**Palm** - Spiritual victory, success, eternal peace, a symbol of Christ's victory of death as associated with Easter.

**Pine** - Intimations of immortality ooze from the very sap of the pine tree. The cone, for example, ensures the continuity of life's renewal. Pine boxes were used as coffins in the Wild West, however, simply because the wood was so plentiful.

**Plow** - Symbolizes the harvest; the reaping of life.

**Poppy** - Eternal sleep.

**Rabbit** - Humility, gentleness, self-sacrifice.

**Rifle** - Usually found on the graves of military members and hunters.

**Rooster** - Symbolizes an awakening, or calling attention to the person's death. It also symbolizes vigilance. Roosters were put on weather vanes to "watch" against evil.

**Rosary** - Commonly found on Catholic gravestones. Symbolizes devotion to Mary and constant prayer for the deceased person.

**Rose** - Love, beauty, hope, unending love, associated with the Virgin Mary, the "rose without thorns." A red rose symbolizes martyrdom and a white rose symbolizes purity and virginity. Whether the rose is a bud, flower or somewhere in between indicates how old the person was at the time of death:

*Just a bud* - normally a child 12 or under

*Partial bloom* - normally a teenager

*Full bloom* - normally in early/mid twenties. The deceased died in the prime of life

*Rosebud, broken* - life cut short, usually found with a young person's grave

**Sacred Heart of Jesus** - An image unique to Catholics. The Sacred Heart is shown containing wounds to which Christ points and it is surrounded by a crown of thorns. The heart represents the suffering of Jesus for our sins. Prayers to the Sacred Heart are said to be effective for the release of souls from Purgatory.

**Scales** - Often marks the grave of someone who was in the legal profession. Sometimes seen with a statue of Saint Michael, which symbolizes his duty of weighing the souls of the departed.

**Scroll** - A symbol of life and time. Both ends rolled up indicates a life that is unfolding like a scroll of uncertain length and the past and future hidden. Often held by a hand representing life being recorded by angels. Can also suggest honor and commemoration.

**Sea Shell** - Resurrection, life everlasting, life's pilgrimage.

**Ship** - A ship is sometimes a representation of the church. It can also simply indicate a life on the sea, as a fisherman or other sailor.

**Sleeping child** - A sleeping child is a Victorian symbol for death.

**Star of David** - Six-pointed star or Star of David, also known as Magen David (Hebrew for shield of David), it is typically used as a symbol of Judaism. The star is actually made of two triangles. It signifies divine protection as epitomized by the alchemistic signs for fire and water, which are an upward and downward apexed triangle. The star is a very ancient symbol, used by several Asia Minor cultures, as well as some Greek city-states. For Judaism, the Star of David came into widespread use at the beginning of the 20th century. Theodore Hertzl, a Jewish activist, adopted the symbol in his writings promoting Palestine as a Jewish homeland.

**Sun** - a symbol of heaven and the journey to heaven. Can also symbolize God or the Son.

*Sun rising* - Renewed life.

*Sun setting* - Death.

*Sun shining* - Life everlasting.

*Suns, Moons and Stars* - The reward of the resurrection.

*Sun-Half* - Can symbolize both the beginning and the end of life.

**Sundial** - Passage of time.

**Sunflower** - Life fulfilled.

**Sword** - A military career.

*Swords, crossed* - indicates death in battle.

**Thistle** - Earthly sorrow, Christ's crown of thorns, remembrance, or Scotland as country of origin.

**Three points, three stars, or three of anything** - Trinity.

**Torch** - Until the church banned such things, most people were buried at night. Torches furnished the light which both allowed the gravediggers to see and the bearers to scare off evil spirits and nocturnal scavengers. Lit, the torch signifies life -- even eternal life. Extinguished, it stands for death. It can also stand for living memory and eternal life (e.g. an eternal flame). An upside down torch represents the end of life.

*Torch, inverted* - If the inverted torch has a flame, it indicates that life is continuing after death. If there is no flame, it means the extinction of life and mourning.

**Tree** - The all-covering love of Christ. Life.

*Tree Felled* - Mortality.

*Tree/Severed branch* - Mortality.

*Tree Sprouting* - Life everlasting.

**Tree Stump** - Life interrupted.

*Tree Stump w/Ivy* - Head of Family; Immortality.

*Tree Trunk* - Brevity of life.

*Tree Trunk Leaning* - Short interrupted life.

**Tree of Life** - Symbolized both earthly and heavenly life and spirituality. The "weeping willow" may have also symbolized the sadness family members felt at the time of a loved one's death.

**Wheat** - Resurrection, bread and wine (Christian), fertility. Convent bakers use wheat flour to make communion wafers, making it a holy plant, of sorts, fit to grace the tombstone of a priest.

*Wheat Gathered* - Harvested into a new life, often denotes someone dying in later life.

*Wheat Bushel* - Body of Christ.

*Wheat Sheaves* - The divine harvest. Often represents the aged.

*Wheat Sheaves paired with grapes* - a symbol of the Eucharist.

**Wreath or Garland** - Represents victory in death.