

“Cemeteries as Heterotopias: Armenian Sepulchral Culture in Agra and Surat, or what the Dead can tell us About the Living”

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Ever since the publication of French historian Philippe Aries’s pathbreaking works, such as the *Hour of our Death*, and *Western Attitudes towards Death* in the late 1970s and 1980s, there has been a stream of scholarship on the cemetery as an “identifying sign of a culture” in the western historical imagination. More and more, sepulchral culture in general, and of the cemetery as a kind of “heterotopia” in particular, have become framed as central to understanding the societies of the living in western history and scholarship. However, with the exception of a handful of works by Edhem Eldem on Ottoman cemeteries and Robert Travers and others on cemeteries in Mughal and British India, few scholars have focused on the places of the dead in “Islamicate” societies. Armenian cemeteries in India have rarely if at all attracted serious scholarly scrutiny, though historians have certainly appreciated the value of the more than three thousand Armenian tombstones in the subcontinent as a source of demographic data. Precious little has been written on the cemeteries themselves, which contain and house the silent relics from the past. This presentation seeks to redress this gap in scholarship by focusing on two exemplary collections of cenotaphs from Mughal India, namely the Armenian section of Agra’s historic Catholic Cemetery dating back to Emperors Akbar (r. 1556-1604) and Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), as well as the late seventeenth century Armenian/Dutch cemetery in Surat, whose origins go back to Aurangzeb’s reign (r. 1657-1707). Treating these sepulchral gardens of the dead as Durkheimian “collective representations” of the communities that created them, this study examines the ways in which these open-air archives function as sacred and symbolic replicas of the world of the living. As Michel Foucault once reminded us, cemeteries are exemplary instances of what he called “heterotopias” or “worlds within worlds” that “reflect” and “mirror” what lies outside. This paper revisits Armenian cemeteries for what their silent inscriptions or architectural motifs such as Islamicate onion domes can tell us about the protean and hybrid identities of the Armenian communities in Mughal India.

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