Funerary Space, an Indicator of Economic Fluctuations

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Abstract. Two crucial elements have impacted the human history - economy and religion. They are inextricably linked, even when this may not be visible. There is a witness space of this linkage, a witness to the changes that have occurred in this history of our times. It is the funerary space, an enclosure dedicated to those who died, which simultaneously reflects the changes and the coordinates of the living functional space. The community economic level in a particular era may trigger mentality alterations, detachment or old habits (re)search. The marking forms of the funerary space are the same as those of the urban space (buildings and forum monuments). It is easy to notice the same level of investment and imports as well as the monuments gradation, depending on the buried rank. This mirroring phenomenon has not known interruptions throughout human history. The deceased space hence offers us today a spectacular view over the economic fundamental role in defining the culture and the identity of the living ones.

Keywords: Funerary space, Funerary monuments, Economic level, Social reflection, Fluctuations, Modernization, Identity, Timelessness.

JEL Codes: Z1, Z12

1. Introduction

The analysis of the economic inconstancies that people had to deal with in time can start with understanding the human perception over death. For Mircea Eliade, ‘death remains the first mystery that deeply bewilders the human conscience.’ (Vulcanescu, 1985, p. 168) This may be the reason why the funerary space converges a wide collection of beliefs, superstitions, customs and even objects laden with a symbolical meaning (since the genesis of the times as we know them.)

The present, albeit under the aura of globalization, is still splintered from a cultural perspective, it allows the coexistence of certain traditions, unwritten laws and even magical forms in the vicinity of funerary markings that are seriously laicized and also turned into identity platforms.

The funerary monuments are objects of memory, forms of identity and manifestos.

Ever since the dawn of history, the funeral space has been a testimony of people’s life, faith, culture and economic means.

The term culture will be used herein in a larger sense, anthropological, subsuming all the life forms in a certain context – space and time.

Irrespective of their culture, people have always been apprehensive about death but obliviousness is what they fear most. The funerary monument is that last shout of every one, that attempt of defining identity and reaching immortality via the memories of the living ones.

The individual economic condition cannot be separated from the social status. This is how the limits are conditioned within which a deceased person is able to delineate ‘identity’.
2. Traces of death – proof of life

Most data trailing back to the lost civilizations are the ones buried along with their dead. The life of forms is constrained by time and their function. The settlements and citadels have gone through slow but sure changes, coins have been melted and cast again, the household items have been ruined by and in time and replaced back.

The most relevant information comes from the archaeological research on the items that were accompanying the dead person for his life after death and of the interment site. For the Neolithic settlements, valuable data derive from the examination of the necropoleis and of the dead worship ritual.

From the first steps, the study of the funerary spaces unveils the importance of the social structure, not only during the time lived on this earth but also after passing into the afterlife (a valid theory for numerous cultural spaces). This social position may allow or prohibit the use of some funerary elements.

Different social classes were able to use a limited repertoire of funeral monuments, so to not breach the social position acquired by birth.

The great monuments of the Ancient Egypt, still preserved today, are the ones erected to honor the life and death of the Pharaohs. It was only their servants who were yet carrying on underground their above-the-ground chores by attending to their masters. I have made the choice to illustrate the contrast between the lack of funerary markings for the slaves and the intricacy of a rectangular mastaba, the signature for the royal funerary architecture of the Dinasty IV, in parallel with the use of the pyramids (fig. 1).

The representation for a certain type of monument typical for fixed economic and social categories varies in time and within cultures. This fact can be depicted by the diversity of the stelas (funerary or of invocation). The large distribution of these funerary markings triggers both uses and interpretations of a wide spectrum. The royal stelas are known, which remind the military victories, or the ones dedicated to the deities. The most costly material is used, making a vast investment for its procurement and its processing – decoration (from the cuneiform writing to the graving or carving some convoluted compositions). Here from also comes the Roman funerary stela in Philippi, representing the image of the Thracian Knight (fig. 4).

Another case I would like to point out at is the wooden funerary stela with a cross-like shape and a hominoid offcut that belongs to the Christian Egypt in the 4th to 12th centuries, along with a twinned anthropomorphic cross (fig. 3) – a contemporary cross referring to the old similar crosses in the Oltenia area.

Fig. 1: Mastaba section: Senwosret-ankh, Lisht

Here are two types of funerary monuments of the western art, emerging in contiguous times. More crosses and funerary stelas of small sizes are dated around 1450 in the Invalids’ Cemetery, gone today (fig. 5) and the Gisant (recumbent statue) of Henry VII (+1509) and his wife at Westminster Abbey, Tudor’s necropolis (fig. 6).

The most troublesome frontiers to pass over are the social ones. The funerary art had endorsed this ‘conservatism’ until the cultural and religious outbreak in the 18th century. The modernization of the states...
had a decisive economic drive, based on the human factor. The financial power has stopped being equal with the birth rights and the cemeteries have been embellished by the opulent monuments of the bourgeoisie.

3. The positioning of the graves. The privileged space.

The funerary space is marked by several urbanistic laws, either written or not. This space is ordered by areal criteria, thus being sections meant for the church staff, children, the ones prematurely gone, statesmen, academicians… besides the privileged and pricier places, located near the main alley or representing cornerstone buildings. The concession costs are directly dependent on the location and size of the plot, namely the visibility and accessibility. Favorable sites are known as the ones placed close by certain space landmarks, including prominent and famous graves. The tradition of privileged sites is rooted in faraway times, but the Middle Ages will raise the bar and turn it into science. That was the time when the pilgrimage routes were demarcated by churches hosting shrines. Such fragments, sometimes small in size, have managed to entice both the living and deceased. Of all the retained medical documents, the most visible include mentions about transactions, contracts between church and parishioners who wanted to purchase a burial site as close as possible to the Holy Relics or the altar. The undercrofts of the churches or the western cathedrals were positioned under the altar. The Cathedral in Ghent preserves the crypt of the Romanic church, even though the elevation is redone in the neo-gothic style. The image below shows the priority of certain grave slabs – the bas-relief of a superior quality, the material (granite) and also the large dimension compared with the other types of funeral tiles in white marble making up the pavement (fig. 7). The graph in fig. 8 highlights the most-sought interment sites inside and outside the churches, whatever the western space or our Orthodox churches (until the moment of state modernization and bone removal from the city premises).

By extension, the cemetery is a privileged space (before the legislative amendments). Not everyone can find a site within its limits. It is not only the religious denomination to matter (fig. 9) but also the extent to which the vicar believes that the deceased fulfilled his moral and material duties.

Fig. 7: Funerary slab in the crypt of St. Gavon Cathedral in Ghent

Source:

Fig. 8: Graphic regarding the gradual distribution of burial places applied to the Sf. Dumitru Church in Suceava’s plan.

Source: the author intervention over the plan (Introducere in arhitectura comparata, Gheorghe Curinschi Vorona, Ed. Tehnica, Bucharest, 1991, p.99)
It is easy to notice how the importance of these areas diminishes as the tombs are closer to the cemetery limit, reaching out the outside wall (in some extreme cases).

The few parish cemeteries that still preserve the funerary monuments near the church are structured on the same principle as the royal necropolises.

4. The state modernization and the laicization of the funerary space

The state modernization has been a carefully prepared phenomenon and the changes have affected all life realms. Faith, customs and also this funerary space have been subjected to arduous challenges, as the rules were forced on from the outside.

In funerary space, mentality and legislative changes begin with the demands made by the authorities of Russian Divan in Bucharest and Iasi to stop burials in churches and their yards (March 9, 1809). After 1831 an annex of the Organic Statute is set, an act titled Regulations for health and police guarding the proper statutes, in Bucharest. Between 1859 and 1877, the Regulation for funerals is established, then the Cemeteries Law was ratified in 1864.

4.1. A reflector of the changing society from a contemporary angle

In the present-day context, the inauguration of cemeteries outside the urban perimeter has led to the shaping of a real social radiography. The new cemeteries were located in the close vicinity of the cities, depending on their distinction/category, thus attracting a specific type of lessees. The funerary urbanism of the first years evolved, sometimes was revoked by the successive overlaps, but it is still visible. In the first stage of these cemeteries, there were simultaneous markings and archaic space shapes alongside monuments (shyly) inspired from the western art or its echoes reaching the urban space.

Elements that were becoming identity symbols inside the cemeteries were introduced in hardship, spawning dogmatic and taste disputes among the living. The choice of a certain type of monument stood for a identity manifesto.

While crossing a funerary space from the first half of the 19th century, an old area can be noticed, with simple crosses of carved stone, a few scattered ampler monuments – columns or obelisks and sometimes busts of the deceased.

A much larger area in the cemeteries is taken by the monuments from late 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by the ones after 1945, imprinted with politics and fear.

The post-December monuments stand out, similar with the old ones being intervened upon. The double pane glass carpentry work confines monuments like pseudoperipteral temples, the old inscriptions are replaced with marble slabs or, even worse, the engraved surface is erased by scraping and then re-written on.

The most recent burial sites are cramped towards the alleys, atypically oriented, not aligned with the initial ones, as they have a protruding profile – the elevation of the edges in the underground tombs with 40-50 cm above the alley and covering with a slab cast in concrete or tessellated cement. These shapes, neither
beautiful nor ugly, are born from the need to isolate a space initially meant for another function, i.e. circulation.

This phenomenon of densification of the cemeteries can be also noticed in the entire urban space. The same need for space, trespassing of the green areas, for distribution on the vertical plan. The city rises from the land level while the burial spaces are adding another subsurface storey...

4.2. Trends in the funerary art

The modernization of the Romanian cultural space brings in the interior of the same complex more distinct types of funerary art. Three relevant directions in their influence and identity discourse should be distinguished:

- The influence of the western art upon the urban space, echoing in the funerary space is a result of multiple factors, from the recent political international relations to sending the youngsters from rich families to study in western Europe. Granting scholarships conditioned by returning to the country of origin and doing the profession of their choice is an important factor that amplifies the westernization phenomenon. Everyone in contact with the occidental civilization comes back with an influence from the artistic taste, fashion and social crazes. This is how decorative objects ordered from abroad show up, as the foreign architects and artists are asked to work for the Romanian partners. Their number is larger and larger with participations in public competitions, an element leading to the institutionalization of the imported art.

In the funerary enclosure, there are formal interpretations of the urban monuments of the moment, eclectic monuments that couple the traditional with the new forms.

The funerary space does not only import the western styles but also the topics of the occidental art.
There will be representations of Pain, Separation and triumph of hope, victory of love over death, of the Cult of Survivor, Last Kiss, as well as shapes of Gisants. The Tragic Deaths will join the Portraits and Apologies with suggestive ornamentation – the characteristic objects and the anecdotal reliefs (Le Normand Romain, 1995, pp.134-339). The introduction of these art topics draws a higher attention in terms of materials, dimensions and the signing artist. There are beautiful examples in cemeteries such as Bell and Sf. Vineri (Saint Friday, Engl.).

- The more and more visible delimitation of the families of noble descent is done by turning to simple and traditional forms – crosses and slabs in stone. The decorative repertoire varies from archaic symbolical elements to the western-like, along with the geometrical or vegetal ornamentation. The blazons are representative elements for the progeny, paintings, bass-reliefs or high reliefs that can be seen on any funerary markings (from slabs on crosses, frontons of some burial chambers and even the decoration for fences. All these are clothed with an archaic stylistic vocabulary or with naïve art, neo-byzantine, neo-gothic, Art Nouveau and neo-Romanian elements.

These slabs are hard to be dated in the absence of solid marking, as the sober expression and plastic language are commonplace. At the same time, the expensive slabs in carved stone cannot be mistaken for the recent ones, cheap and lacking the symbolical discourse of decoration, functional slabs of reinforced concrete.

- The national style, neo-Romanian, is a cultural and artistic synthesis emerged in a moment where the entire world was looking for its identity roots. The funerary monuments often use graphisms and monograms in this style, besides the characteristic ornamentation and the volumes. There are cases where personalities of a boyar descent call on this stylistic language, as a form of identity justification. On the other hand, a new category of small bourgeoisie with a strong financial power, choose to order imposing vaults from prestigious architects. This applies to Gheorgheff (Evloghie and Cristo) brothers, financists of the 19th century who hired architect Ion Mincu and sculptor F. Storck.
This identity style becomes official when it starts being promoted by political personalities of a high cultural stature. The presence of the national style within the funerary space confirms and builds up the human need of identity affirmation, bringing a note of atemporality and essentialization.

4.3. The selection of the artists/architects for building a funerary monument, proof of the financial power and social status

The decision of placing a funerary monument comes as a response to a traumatic situation, the loss of someone beloved. Oftentimes, the investment for such monument, irrespective of the category, reaches the top of the budget available to the grieving family. This is the only way when the descendants feel to have done their moral duty towards the deceased. And this is how they select the project and of the artist/architect. To turn to a trendy personality coincides with the investment of a substantial amount, and both actions are easily visible from the outside, at a social level.

- The expression of the financial power – The funerary monument of the Gheorgheff brothers

_Gheorgheff bankers vault /necropolis_ is a very important work of Ion Mincu (Focșani, 1852 – Bucharest, 1912), in the funerary space between 1903 and 1905. The architect is a school initiator and the promoter of Neo-Romanian style in architecture. The Gheorgheff brothers demand comes as a confirmation of their economic power, and their need for eternal affirmation. The mixed chamber, underground developed for the interment spaces and over-the-ground for the space to be visited, justifies by its volumetry and positioning the display of the ornamental richness. The entire segmented interior into horizontal registers via string courses, blind arcades, stuccoes and chromatic elements in the fresco technique can be seen unitarily at the gallery level (from the crypts to the central dome).

The promoters appeal to sculptor Frederic Storck (1872 – 1942) to do the sculptures of the four evangelists Luke, Mark, Matthew and Joan. These statues define the exterior corners of the chamber by using a neo-Byzantine language.
The materials used for this vault, by far exceed the level of those currently used for funerary monuments. It stands out the bronze, the marble, the stucco, the interior gilded murals, the bass-relief and tondi.

5. The present day

Not long ago, I would have considered this ‘present day’ the interval that started with the re-liberalization of death and return to the not-hidden faith, debuting with the political and social events in 1989. Today, I find myself in the situation of dividing this decade into at least two sub-divisions. During the 90’s, the funerary markings used contemporary expressions with a high quality sculptural intervention, while preserving a natural scale of these objects.

Even this ‘latest craze’ is represented by breaking the natural, by having certain monuments emerge and scandalize with either their dimensions or materials and processing. The black marble, superficially engraved, presents a design of a white line with the face of the deceased or shocking compositions. This type of monument has been common ground in the recent years for the social categories belonging to the minority ethnic groups in their attempt to assert themselves.

The funerary architecture aims to achieve a discourse based on economic power and influence, the same distressing elements in size and contrasting materials are being looked for, and also the equipping of such constructions for the eternity with technical facilities, namely elevators or video camera with various sensors… (fig. 21). It should be noted the use of costly decorative details at the entrance, which are signal-type elements for guests or the possessors of other vaults.

An above-ground vault erected during the last year is to be found in Ghencea Cemetery (fig. 23).

In this case, it should be looked at the neoclassical and baroque elements, at the romantic sculpture of angels and at the dominant chromatic of golden ochre, a reference to the gold value. In spite of the fact that
numerous elements are not unusual for the funerary space, the manner in which these are articulated, staged proves an indubitable and honest discourse of identity and finance. The alight cables emphasize the features of the vault during the night and a meter records their consumption and the alarm activity.

   The old values are wiped out and yet the economic power of the deceased is increasingly visible in the selection of the funerary monuments. The artistic and the opulence levels are directly proportional to the high financial level.

   The personalities reach their social position regardless of their status obtained by birth.

6. Conclusions

   The marking of the tombs, a last identity act, has and will reflect both the financial condition of the deceased and also the cultural level and artistic taste of both dead and living.

   To compare the contemporary and the age-old markings, it is absolutely necessary to reintroduce certain norms regarding the artistic quality of the monuments.

   Nowadays the monuments no longer embody the traditional values but they represent the cultural identity of the donors.

7. Acknowledgements

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8. References