

Symbolism in The Carvings on Old Gravestones

Symbols On Gravestones And Their Interpretations

Collection from Barbara Rotundo, Laurel Gabel, Francis Duval

ANIMALS

Ant: Christian industry
Bats (rare): the underworld
Bee: resurrection: risen Christ; chastity
Birds: souls
Birds, flying: flight of the soul back to God
Butterfly: resurrection; Christian metamorphosis
Chrysalis: Christian metamorphosis; resurrection
Descending dove: the Holy Ghost
Dove: peace: innocence: purity (7 doves—holy spirit); messenger of God carrying the soul to heaven
Eagle: fierceness; ascension; the heavenly conveyor national emblem of the United States: the military professional, Civil War casualties
Eagle, winged: St. John the Evangelist
Egg: regeneration
Fish: Christ; plentifulness
Fox: cruelty; cunning
Frog: resurrection
Hart: the faithful thirsting for God
Lamb: Christ: redeemer; meekness; sacrifice; child; innocence; most common 19th child's marker
Lamb with banner: resurrection
Lion: strength: courage, royalty: power; guardian; fallen hero
Lion, winged: St. Mark the Evangelist
Ox winged: St. Luke the Evangelist
Peacock: immortality; eternity; resurrection; incorruptibility of the flesh
Pelican: feeds young with own blood; redemption through Christ
Phoenix: immortality; baptism
Ram: sacrifice

Rooster: vigilance; St. Peter; the awakening from the fall from grace; repentance
Sheep & goats: Christians and non-believers
Serpent: symbol of death
Snake: sin; Satan; fall of man
Snake, hooped: eternity
Snake with tail in mouth: eternity; unity
Sphinx: lion represents strength and protection; used to guard entrances
Squirrel: Christian forethought; spiritual striving
Stag: same as hart

FIGURES

Angel: messenger between God & man; guide
Angel, flying: rebirth; guardian angel
Angel, trumpeting: call to the resurrection
Angel, weeping: grief
Breasts: the Divine, nourishing fluid of the soul (17th century); the church; the ministry; the nourishment of the soul
Child, sleeping: Victorian death motif
Death's head, winged: mortality
Effigies: the soul
Effigies, crowned: personal reward of righteousness
Effigies, winged: the flight of the soul
Father Time: mortality, the grim reaper
Four Evangelists: Matthew, winged man; Mark, winged lion; Luke, winged ox; John, winged eagle
Hand of God, pointing downward: mortality, sudden death
Hand of God, pointing upward: the reward of the righteous confirmation of life after death
Hands: devotion, prayer

Symbolism in The Carvings on Old Gravestones

Handshakes: farewell to earthly existence
Hands clasped: in death as in life, the devotion of these two is not destroyed
Imps: figures, some winged, some not, doing funeral-related tasks; mortality
Man, winged: St. Matthew the Evangelist
Trumpeters: heralds of the resurrection
Woman, weeping: mourning; recalls myth of Niobe, whom the gods turned to stone as she wept for her slain children

LATIN PHRASES

Fugit hora: "hours are fleeting": "time flies"
IHS: monogram or symbol representing the Greek contraction of "Jesus"; sometimes regarded as an abbreviation of the Latin phrase meaning "Jesus, Savior of Men"
INRI: often seen on a banner of Latin cross; "Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum", Latin for Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews (John 12:19-22)
Memento mori: "remember death"
Tempus erat: "time is gone"; "time has run out"
XP-Chi Rho: first two Greek letters of the word "Christ"

THINGS

Alpha & Omega: first and last letters of the Greek alphabet symbolizing the beginning & end of all things, see Revelation 22:13
Anchor: hope; life eternal; may signify seafaring profession
Anvil: martyrdom
Arch: triumph; victory in death
Ark: church; salvation
Ark of Noah (rare): refuge, salvation
Armor: protection from evil

Arrow: martyrdom; mortality
Arrow quiver of: warlike
Banner: victory; triumph
Battle-axe: martyrdom
Bells: call to worship
Bibles: resurrection through the scripture; the clergy
Book Bible: wisdom
Books, stacked: knowledge
Branch, severed: mortality
Bugles: resurrection; the military profession
Candle being snuffed: time, mortality
Candle flame: life
Candlestick: Christ: devotion
Celtic cross: circle on it symbolizes eternity
Circle: eternity; or earth
Clock (rare): passage of time, mortality
Clouds: the divine abode
Coats of arms and crests: lineage, status
Coffins: mortality
Column, broken: sorrow; broken life
Columns, doors: heavenly entrance
Crescent moon: Virgin
Cross: salvation
Cross with rays of rising sun: glory
Cross with winding sheet: descent from cross
Crown: reward of faithful, victory, triumph, glory; righteousness; resurrection
Crown on cross: sovereignty of Christ
Crozier: bishop
Cup: Eucharist
Darts: mortality, dart of death
Drapery over anything: sorrow; mourning
Field artillery (rare): the military profession
Finger: pointing to heaven
Flame: eternity
Fleur-de-lis: Virgin; Trinity
Flyfot: swastika
Garlands: victory in death

Symbolism in The Carvings on Old Gravestones

Gate: death of departure from life; entrance to heaven
Globe, winged: disk is symbolic of Creator; wings represent "God over all"
Harp or lyre: heavenly music; joy; associated with David and the Psalms, St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, poets and poetry, is the emblem of Ireland
Heart: charity; the soul in bliss, the abode of the soul; love of Christ
Heart with anchor & cross: faith, hope & charity
Horns: resurrection
Hourglass, winged: swift passage in earthly time
Incense: worship; prayer; adoration
Keys, crossed: St. Peter
Ladder: Passion; Jacob; aspiration
Lamp: Word of God; truth; knowledge, good works
Lance: martyrdom
Muskets (rare): military profession, a professional huntsman
Nimbus: circle or disk around arms of cross; crown of thorns; eternity
Orbs, as celestial bodies: the reward of the resurrection
Orbs, as effigies: the soul
Pallbearers: mortality
Palls: mortality
Picks and shovels: mortality
Portals: passageways to the eternal journey
Portraits: stylized likenesses of the deceased
Pyramid: symbolic of death
Rock: steadfastness of Christ; stability
Rosary: devotion to Mary
Scales: weighing of souls; justice
Scroll: the law; Scriptures
Scythe: time, the divine harvest
Shell: pilgrimage: baptism of Christ
Shell, scallop: pilgrim; pilgrim's journey, resurrection

Ship: the Church
Ships' profiles: the seafaring profession
Shrine: wisdom, knowledge
Skeletons: mortality; Death
Skull: death; sin
Skull, winged: flight of the soul from mortal man
Skulls and crossbones: mortality
Star: birth; life; Christ
Star, five pointed: Star of Bethlehem: star of Jacob; divine guidance and protection
Star, six pointed: the Father; Creation; heavenly wisdom
Sun: God or Son
Sun, setting: death
Sun, rising: resurrection; renewed life
Suns, moons and stars: the reward of the resurrection
Sword: martyrdom; courage; warfare
Swords, crossed: high ranking military person
Three points, three leaves, three of anything—Trinity
Tombs: mortality
Torch: zeal; enlightenment
Torch, inverted: extinction of life; death; mourning
Torch, upright: immortality; liberty; upright life; the scholastic world; the betrayal of Christ
Trumpet: Day of Judgment; resurrection
Urn: soul; mortality
Urn, draped: death, sorrow
Winged wheel: Holy Spirit
Yoke: burden-bearing; service; patience

TREES AND PLANTS

Almond: favor from God; Virgin birth
Apple: sin; Eve
Bellflower: gratitude
Bouquets: condolences, grief
Buds: renewal of life
Cedar: strong faith; length of days; success

Symbolism in The Carvings on Old Gravestones

Cypress: sorrow; death; eternal life,
Roman symbol for mourning
Easter lily: modern flower symbolic of
resurrection
Evergreens: immortality
Flower: brevity of earthly existence,
sorrow; certain flowers may
symbolize emotions, particular
aspirations, attitudes, both religious
and secular
Flower, broken: premature death
Fruit: eternal plenty
Fruit and vine: Jesus Christ; the
Christian church
Gourds: the coming to be and passing
away of all earthly matters
Ivy: abiding memory, friendship, fidelity
Laurel: victory triumph purity
Lily, lilies: resurrection, purity
Lotus: Egyptian water lily and ornament
Oak: supernatural power and strength;
eternity
Olive: peace; healing faith
Palm: spiritual victory over death;
martyrdom; reward of the righteous;
peace; a plant whose leaves
resemble a hand
Pineapple: hospitality
Pomegranate: immortality; resurrection;
unity; nourishment of the soul
Poppy: symbolic of sleep, therefore,
death
Roses: condolence, sorrow; the brevity
of earthly existence; of English
descent—the Tudor rose
Sheaves of wheat: time, the divine
harvest
Strawberry: righteousness; humility
Thistle: of Scottish descent; the
inevitability of death, remembrance
Tree: faith; life; the Tree of Life
Tree, felled: mortality
Tree trunk, broken: premature death
Vine: Christian church; Christ; wine, the
symbolic blood of Jesus; the
sacraments

Wheat sheaves: the divine harvest
Willow, weeping: grief; death (carried at
Masonic funerals); earthly sorrow,
the symbolic tree of human sadness;
Nature's lament
Wreath: victory in death, indestructible
crown worn by triumphant Christian;
eternity
Wreath worn by skull: victory of death
over life
Yew: immortality

Association for Gravestone Studies
30 Elm Street Worcester, MA 11689