Chapels of Rest and Cemeteries.
Significant development between 17th and 20th centuries.

The layout of sacred burial grounds has evolved to some extent since the start of colonisation, in keeping with changes in society, lifestyles and the structures of urban organisation. Three main periods should be noted: the traditional layout of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, continuing medieval understanding; the arrival of garden-cemeteries in the middle of the 19th century; and the development of peripheral parks and mausoleums since the nineteen-seventies. Structural adaptations were accompanied by certain changes in the detail of the decorative elements which served to identify particular burial sites.

Saint-Jean Bight,
view of the cemetery and church
Photo : François Brault

The original style of burial grounds in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries

Cemetery at the convent of
the Grey Nuns of Montréal
Photo : François Brault

At the end of the Roman empire in the 4th century and during the Merovingian era, from the 6th to the 8th centuries, the dead were buried in necropoli outside towns along the roadways. As the parish system became increasingly well-organised from the start of 9th century, and the sacramental role of the clergy was developed and extended, so one finds that burial places begin to be located alongside the church buildings. It was the duty of the faithful to be baptised and buried in their parishes. This practice continued throughout the Middle Ages right up until the industrial era. Very often a wall was put up to define the limits of the consecrated ground thus creating a microcosm, a space between life and the hereafter.

Naturally, these practices were introduced in New France and then, after the conquest, in Lower Canada. In towns and villages burial grounds surrounded the churches. A hierarchy of burial places was also established. Religious, together with the richer lay people and dignitaries were often buried in the church itself. The others were buried outside, and the poorest were often taken to the Paupers' cemetery, like, for example, the one next to l'Hôtel-Dieu in Québec city.

"Before 1760, under the French regime, Catholics and Protestants were not allowed to be buried in the same ground. For this reason, several anonymous, temporary burial grounds existed in the city (of Québec), parallel to the consecrated ground of the officially recognised cemeteries." [1]

With the increasing number of Protestants, principally Anglican, special cemeteries were created. The churchyard of St Matthew's in Québec city is one of the oldest. It is still in existence today in the heart of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste quarter. It was used as a burial ground from 1771 to 1778 and is today one of the most delightful town parks in Haute-ville (the Upper Town).

Country churchyards were very similar to their urban counterparts at this time. Good examples of the Catholic tradition can still be seen at Saint-Mathias-sur-Richelieu (1818), Saint-Pierre de l'île-d'Orléans and at Saint-Paul-de-Joliette. An example of the Anglican tradition can be seen at

[1] Guay, Lorraine, « L'évolution de l'espace de la mort à Québec », In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 25.

Saint-Sylvestre in the county of Lotbinière. Chapels providing places of contemplation for visitors, and charnel-houses were often set up along the cemetery walls. Certain important people such as lords etc. could have a chapel of ease built on their land, as in the case of Louis-Joseph Papineau who had a chapel erected in the early 19th century in Montebello, and of James Cuthbert, a British soldier, lord of Berthier. The Cuthbert chapel was the first Protestant construction after the conquest. It was built to hold the body of Cuthbert's deceased wife who died in 1785. The chapel continued to serve as a place of worship for the family.

The general tendency at this time was to superpose graves. In other words, members of the same family were buried one on top of another. This practice led to the ground level of the cemetery becoming higher than that of the street or lane. The limited space for churchyards, the pollution they caused in both towns and villages, and the cholera epidemics in the eighteen-thirties all partly explain the changes made in the middle of the 19th century.

The walls of Saint-Pierre
on the île-d'Orléans
Photo : François Brault

Garden-cemeteries of the 19th century

From 1855 onwards a decree prohibited burial in towns. Cemeteries were to be located just outside the towns instead. Four large cemeteries were founded around Québec city between 1848 and 1879: Mount Hermon (1848), Saint-Charles in Basse-ville (the Lower Town) (1855), Belmont in Sainte-Foy (1859) and St Patrick in Sillery (1879). In Montréal, two large cemeteries were set up on the side of the mount. The Mount Royal cemetery, a Protestant burial ground, was inaugurated in 1852 and Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemetery, a Catholic one, in 1848. With more available space, members of the same family were now buried next to each other. These were called family lots. Sometimes people constructed tombs which were often quite imposing. They became part of a dramatic landscape giving an ostentatious character to these tranquil places.

Later in the century, this practice was copied in the countryside. Outlying places were used for cemeteries more and more as opposed to the centre of the villages.

Tomb in
Notre-Dame-de-la-Côte-
des-Neiges cemetery
Photo : François Brault

"Several parishes have preserved the old plans of these 'parks of eternity'. Some were based on a very simple design such as a rectangular grid, others were more baroque and decorative. […] The garden-cemetery was a piece of ground which was divided up into various sectors and pathways […] Sociologically, the cemetery, rather like a town, seems to be a microcosm of the class structure and identities of a given community. The central walk or the main boulevard is home to people in authority, the powerful and the rich, those who have succeeded in life. […] The middle classes are to be found in the lowlier avenues. In the biggest cemeteries ethnic communities are grouped together in a Chinese quarter, an Italian quarter, a Greek quarter …"[2]

The cemetery, thus detached from the church, lost its value bit by bit as privileged holy ground. It continued to be linked to the parish but the church people involved had now to associate with an increasing number of lay people. The cemetery official living on the edge of the cemetery is one example of this new association.

---

[2] Lessard, Michel, "Les cimetières de paroisses, hauts lieux du patrimoine", In. : *Le patrimoine de nos cimetières: s'entendre pour agir* [Actes du colloque, Université Laval 23 et 24 octobre 1997], Économusée de l'Au-Delà, Montréal, 1997, p. 70.

As a result of this separation from the church, people felt a need for some kind of blessing in the places of burial. The church was no longer the spiritual focus of attention, acting as a key symbol in people's lives. So coincidentally, it was about this time that there was a remarkable increase in the placing of religious objects in cemeteries, and one finds wooden monuments, statues of angels and Calvary crosses alongside stone memorials. Together they formed a garden "uniting vegetable and mineral" where sentimentality was mixed with contemplation.

The management of funerary arrangements since the nineteen-seventies

A new tendency has appeared over the last few years to the detriment of the garden-cemeteries. Large cemetery parks have been set up outside towns in rural areas. Being totally private enterprises they no longer come under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction. They can also cover vast tracts of land of up to several hundred square kilometres.

Anonymity is the rule in these huge complexes. One is offered the choice of traditional burial, or burial in a communal mausoleum. Upright grave memorials, however, are no longer used. Only a granite or bronze plaque on the ground indicates the exact burial spot. The large garden-cemeteries have reacted to this development by starting, in their turn, to offer clients the option of burial in a mausoleum.

Charnel house at
Saint-Pierre cemetery
on the île d'Orléans
Photo : François Brault

"If, in the 19th century, the removal of the cemetery to outlying areas signified a distancing from the churchyard, the creation of peripheral necropolises has definitely cut the link both territorially and administratively. With the advent of private enterprise, cemeteries have become detached from social and religious affairs, putting the accent on the economic aspect. They are concerned to reduce to a minimum the formalities surrounding death to a minimum. This change is not without its significance. It points to a marginalising of death as well as of the Church, signalling a further separation between the sacred and the profane." [3]

Charles Bourget
Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

Bibliography:

- *Le patrimoine de nos cimetières : s'entendre pour agir* [Actes du colloque, Université Laval 23 et 24 octobre 1997], Économusée de l'Au-Delà, Montréal, 1997, 124 pages.
- Béland, Mario. « Les monuments de bois : ces autres disparus », In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 33-37.
- Bodson, Gabriel et Louis-Alain Ferron. « Les deux grands cimetières du Mont-Royal », In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 19-22.
- Dandavino, Rita Rachele. « Notre-Dame-des-Neiges», In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 13-16.
- Guay, Lorraine. « L'évolution de l'espace de la mort à Québec », In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 24-27.
- Labbé, Thérèse. « L'objet funéraire : un imaginaire à explorer », In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 28-32.
- Mendel, David. « Église St. Matthew et cimetière protestant », In. : *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 1)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, pp. 202-203.
- Roy, Guy-André. « Église et mur du cimetière de Saint-Mathias-sur-Richelieu », In. : *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 2)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, pp. 290-291.

---

[3] Guay, Lorraine, « L'évolution de l'espace de la mort à Québec », In. : *Continuité*, no 49, hiver/printemps 1991, pp. 27.