

# SITES RELATED TO DEATH AND DISASTER IN CULTURAL AND TOURISM GEOGRAPHY – A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nāves un traģēdiju vietas kultūras ģeogrāfijā

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**Abstract.** Research into tourism, a relatively new discipline, is developing, using theories and approaches from other disciplines. Extensive research is underway in Latvia on sites related to tragic historical events and death, including the use of Holocaust sites in tourism. In order to comprehensively study these dark heritage sites, previous studies related to cemeteries and death sites have been analysed. The aim of this article is to identify death sites as special places and as elements of the cultural landscape. The attitude of locals towards dark heritage sites cannot be understood without understanding the attitude towards death sites and cemeteries in the cultural context. This article gives an overview of existing research in necrography, summarising the geographical approaches used to characterise these particular sites. The studies already conducted in Latvia have been reviewed and the most relevant definitions of dark tourism and thanatourism have been identified. The main problems faced in including places of death and tragedy in tourism product promotions have been described, especially if they are related to tragic events such as the Holocaust. In conclusion, the main aspects and approaches to be used for further research into the use of Holocaust sites in tourism have been identified.

**Keywords:** *cemeteries, dark heritage sites, dark tourism, Holocaust sites, sites associated with death*

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## Introduction

In the last decades cemeteries, burial sites and death/genocide sites have become an integral part of tourism supply and demand. Cemeteries, which reflect local culture, politics and historical events, have become tourist attractions, as have other sites related to death and tragic historical events. It should be noted that local communities are not always willing to expose these cemeteries or to "open" dark heritage sites to tourists. This depends on both local culture and collective memory and locals' desire to be either "silent" or "vocal" regarding tragic historical events and their aftermath. One of the central issues in this discussion is, on the one hand, interest from tourists and, on the other hand, the attitudes of locals towards the inclusion of these sites in tourism product promotions and the ethical aspects of consumption. As a result of the complexity of 20<sup>th</sup>-century historical events, there are many places in Latvia associated with tragic events and death. A number of them have become visitor "attractions", though many sites are still "hidden". Some sites of death associated with

important events in Latvian history are more or less known and marked: the sites where participants in the 1905 revolution were punished, as well as the resting places of revolutionaries, the death sites of World War II partisans, and sites where killings of local people took place. However, World War II also left many death sites on the territory of Latvia that have remained hidden for a long time, including about 265 Holocaust memorial sites, and the question of their acknowledgement and exposure still arouses debate. The debate and disagreement are due to the complex nature of these places – “Sites with a controversial history, including locations of war, atrocity, and horror’... or ‘places with shadowed history” (Hartmann 2014, 166), “places of pain and shame” (Logan & Reeves 2009), and due to different parties involved in these events – the victims, the perpetrators and the observers/bystanders (Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996). These are places related to the Holocaust – ghetto areas, concentration and death camps, mass murder sites and mass grave sites – and also places where Jews were hidden or rescued. How are these places highlighted in the landscape and in memories, and what feelings do they evoke? How do you better label them as dark tourism destinations? Light (2017) outlines the political and ideological context of tourism at places of death and suffering as a direction for future research.

Although over the last 20 years researchers worldwide have been actively engaged in research into difficult heritage and dark tourism, such research has only just begun in Latvia. The purpose of this article is to analyse sites of death in cultural geography studies and dark heritage sites in tourism geography in order to define and apply the most appropriate geographic approaches to research on dark tourism sites, including Holocaust sites.

### **Place, space, and cemeteries and other death-related sites**

Place and space are central concepts in human geography. People develop a sense of place by attaching meaning and emotion to locations, associating them with noteworthy events and labelling them. (Williams & Lew 2015). Place and space in their holistic meaning and entirety is defined as “landscape” (Melluma 2012). Cultural geography explores human imprints and visible imprints in the landscape. Cultural landscapes are divided into different types such as: ethnic, folk/local, popular, and elite landscapes (Lornell & Meador 1983). Cultural geography focuses on material culture and landscape, while social geography and folk geography also explores intangible cultural elements such as rituals and traditions (Lornell & Meador 1983; Merridale 2003; Stevenson, Kenten & Maddrell 2016). Thus, burial sites and cemeteries are also a characteristic element and expression of folk and local culture.

Human history shows that people have always created places to remember the dead (Lee 2015). Francaviglia characterises cemeteries as thoughtfully created and highly organised cultural landscapes which are miniature representations of the real world and exhibit the characteristics of populated areas (Francaviglia 1971). Merridale states that “cemeteries reflect the beliefs, tastes, interests, and even social organisation of the people who created them” (Merridale, 2003 176). Johnson defines a cemetery as

a place that “manifests and intensifies a variety of rural and urban spaces and, paradoxically, generates a model milieu for the living” (Johnson, 2008 777). That echoes Francaviglia’s notion that “Cemeteries, as the visual and spatial expression of death, may tell us a great deal about the living people who created them” (Francaviglia 1971, 509).

Sites associated with death are special places, containing specific information and memories. They are considered both as holy places and as places of special atmosphere and power. They are associated with the spirits and presences of the dead; they may be places to communicate with the dead; they create particular feelings (grief, mourning, anger, shock); they can be a place to reflect on the relationship between people and places, and the interactions between them (Clark 2014; Lee 2015).

The French philosopher Foucault’s designation for cemeteries – “heterotopic space” (Foucault 1967) – is widely used. This refers to somewhere which is both a real place and a space, but at the same time distinct from everyday space. It is a place and a landscape with a spiritual and mystical atmosphere. Sites that are associated with death, mortality and burials have also been described as the “last landscape” (Worpole 2003); “other” or “alternative space” (Young and Light 2016); emotional landscapes (Maddrell 2016); and places of pilgrimage.

In Europe, sites associated with death have attracted interest over the past two centuries, although they were a marginal topic of research as in many cultures death and death issues have been “taboo”. In contemporary society there is a growing interest in death and the bodies of the dead. These topics are more highlighted in popular culture, in museums and exhibitions, in the media, and by the tourism industry and celebrities (Young and Light 2016). Geographers have focused on cemeteries since the 1960s (Pitte 2004). Necrography has developed as the science of spatial and cultural dimensions in burial landscapes, or “the study of deathscapes” (Muzaini 2017). Academics specialising in ethnography, architecture, sociology, genealogy, psychology, economics and politics also study death, rituals, graves, and cemeteries associated with death (Worpole 2003). In his study, Paraskevas (2006) analyses grave inscriptions and epitaphs, describing how they represent the position of dead people in their societies and how this demonstrates social identity. Ancient cemeteries reflect the political, cultural and social history of the country where they are located and reflect public values and attitudes towards death. Today, these places are viewed in the context of socio-cultural, economic, and political questions (Young and Light 2016).

Previous research has described grave formation and morphology in Western culture, and their relation to economic development, hygiene and sanitary norms and social values. While in the Middle Ages burials were carried out in or near churches, during the period of the Industrial Revolution cemeteries were located outside the city. As cities expanded, some cemeteries were located again in city boundaries. Initially, cemeteries were strictly marked area with a wall, a fence and a gate, but later on they became city parks, recreational areas or areas for walking without any special

enclosures. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, so-called national cemeteries were built in Europe, which were places where prominent people were laid to rest. World War I cemeteries were created in a different way: as simple, similarly designed rows of symmetrical graves. The transition from garden cemeteries to lawn cemeteries took place in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century. The discussions about the use of abandoned and closed cemeteries as leisure and recreational sites emerged at that time (Lee 2015; Young and Light 2016). Lawn cemeteries dominated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and with increasing cremations, so-called gardens of rest as classless sites emerged (Rugg 2006). Globalisation also affects cemeteries and crematoria, as ash dispersals outside the cemetery are increasing in number (Pitte 2004). Cemeteries manifest the consequences of immigration – they are becoming culturally and religiously diverse and are a meeting place for different cultures (Swensen and Skår 2018).

Sites associated with death are an endless field of research, as they reveal new and nuanced perspectives on death, killing, mourning and memory (Stevenson, Kenton and Maddrell 2016). Cultural geographers offer a prism through which to look at traumatic sites. Geographers study cemeteries as total landscapes, analysing their spatial features and how the spatial arrangement of elements changes over time. The meaning of a landscape varies depending on who is looking at it. Places of death and remembrance and landscapes also reflect issues of power in society. Thus, memorials and remembrance sites are not only things of the past but also a part of the present (Leib and Webster 2015). G. Barrett and T. Barret (2001) have also described cemeteries as storehouses of natural and cultural capital in the world, as sites of high biodiversity value, with rare, valuable tree species that deserve increased attention and protection. In contemporary Western society, the context in which we look at places of death is changing, along with changes in society, culture, economy, politics and environment. Cemeteries and places of death serve as multifunctional, easily accessible, amenity space with secondary functions – recreation, walks, reading, contemplation, including dog-walking, jogging, cycling, more like a park (Lee 2015; Swensen and Skår 2018). Tourists are attracted to cemeteries, battle sites, genocide and Holocaust sites, sites of individual and mass murder, celebrity death sites, corpses, conflict zones and dangerous sites, and torture museums. There is also a growing variety of commemorative rituals, traditions and events held at these locations (Young and Light 2016). According to the typology of tourist sites, sites associated with death can be defined as sites of special interest and heritage sites (Williams and Lew 2015).

Landscape in geography is not only a process, a feeling, a resource for development and a part of heritage, but also a problem (Melluma 2012). It all depends on how we look at these places and how we treat them. If we continue to treat them as “morbid” (Young and Light 2016), keeping them at a distance, we will ignore the places that really matter in life. As Lee states (2015, 109) “The creation of a new place or a new relationship to place is the creation of a new identity, which is formed out of the place it has helped change”. These places are still highly ambiguous, acceptable to

some people but not to others – out of the ordinary or alternative places (Young and Light 2016).

### **Darkest sites of dark tourism**

In tourism visiting sites related to death and disaster is called “dark tourism” or “thanatourism”. Both concepts of dark tourism and thanatourism are still used in parallel. Dark tourism is defined as “the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real or commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley and Lennon 1999, 198). Seaton (1996) in his publication on thanatourism defines it as “heritage staged around attractions and sites associated with death, acts of violence, scenes of disaster, and crimes against humanity”. Some scholars have used also alternative definitions: for example, “sites associated with death and suffering” (Isaac and Cakmak 2014); “dark heritage” (Thomas, Seitsonen and Herva 2016), “difficult heritage” (Logan and Reeves 2009), “sensitive heritage” (Magee and Gilmore 2015) and “trauma tourism” (Clark 2009). The difficulty and complexity of the topic, as well as its interdisciplinary nature, is best characterised by Stone (2013, 308): “Dark tourism also symbolises sites of dissonant heritage, sites of selective silences, sites rendered political and ideological, sites powerfully intertwined with interpretation and meaning, and sites of the imaginary and the imagined”.

Research into the field of dark tourism is mainly focused on the supply side of dark tourism, including site authenticity, commodification (Cole 2000; Foley and Lennon 1997; Lennon and Foley 1999; Wang 1999; Wight and Lennon 2007) and site typology (Miles 2002; Sharpley 2005; Stone 2006). In the mid-2000s the focus of research into dark tourism shifted to the demand side of dark tourism, exploring visitors’ motivations, experiences and behaviours (Asworth 2008; Ashworth and Hartman 2005; Biran and Poria 2011; Cohen 2011; Zhang et al. 2016) and emotional dimensions (Ashworth and Isaac 2015; Buda 2015; Buda et al. 2014; Nawijn et al. 2016), as well as the political dimensions of dark tourism’s relationship with collective memory and national identity (Best 2007; Stone 2012).

Dark tourism represents “a multi-disciplinary academic lens through which to scrutinise a broad range of social, cultural, geographical, anthropological, political, managerial and historical concerns” (Stone 2013, 309).

Research into Holocaust-related sites has made up a significant proportion of the total research carried out into dark tourism. According to Stone (2006), these sites are the “darkest” sites in the whole spectrum of dark tourism. The “darkest” sites are characterised by being oriented to education, conservation and commemoration; in addition, there is higher political influence attached to them. Holocaust tourism can be experienced at an actual Holocaust site or elsewhere (Miles 2002), although discussions about the geographical location of memorial sites are still ongoing (Clark 2014). Holocaust sites in Europe began to be identified and commemorated in the early 1960s, but Holocaust tourism research started gaining momentum after the

collapse of the USSR and the “Iron Curtain”, resulting in an increase in pilgrimages of memory by the members of the Jewish community to Eastern Europe (Stier 1995).

### **Research in Latvia**

A steady tradition of regularly visiting and caring for graves has been going on for centuries in the territory of Latvia. Already in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, farmers were buried in burial mounds. Cemeteries and burial ceremonies are an important part of Latvia`s heritage – places where the cultural memory of the people is rooted and ongoing. Traditionally, rural cemeteries were set up near farmsteads, on hillsides (“sand hills”), at the edge of woods, near beautiful trees and in the driest, most beautiful places (Uzule and Zelche 2014). The Latvian repository of folklore (Cabinet of Folksongs) holds many folk songs related to cemeteries and burials (Tautas dainas, S.a.). Cemeteries and cemetery culture is one of 99 treasures included in the Latvian Culture Canon (LKK, S.a.).

Cemeteries in Latvia have been studied by archaeologists, philologists, architects, biologists and sociologists. Research on the formation of rural cemeteries has been conducted only in the form of compilation of historical and statistical data. The most significant research works in this field are Uzule and Zelče's monograph on cemetery festivals (Uzule and Zelče 2014) and a chapter, “Sacred places of the Region: Church and Cemetery Landscapes”, in a book of sacral landscapes of Butnieku municipality (Zarina, Lukins, Voloshin and Salicka 2013, 85). It explores the spatial structure of cemeteries, the process of their formation, and their interactions with surrounding areas and their inhabitants. Sacred landscapes and their elements have been identified: church, church towers, cemeteries, monuments and crosses. Latvia also reflects the worldwide practice that the size of monuments are testament to the merits of deceased people, their wealth and that of their family.

The building of the State Security Committee in Latvia is also considered to be a place of death. Its use for the development of a creative dark tourism product has been studied by researchers from Vidzeme University College (Grinfelde and Veliverronene 2018). Their study analyses visitors' comments on TripAdvisor, the on-site experience and the emotions the site evokes.

Certain dark tourism sites related to the Holocaust or the dark heritage of the Soviet period in the Baltic States have been included in international research on dark tourism. However, it should be stated that the topic has still not been researched enough (Wight and Lennon, 2007; Wight 2016) as a focus on this area in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States could be realised only after the collapse of USSR.

Light (2017) indicated that the field of dark tourism research still needs deeper research to be carried out into ethical issues related to the presentation and consumption of dark heritage places, dark tourism in a political and ideological context, the role of tourism and the nature of disagreement between different groups, as well as the experience of visitors at a wider range of sites and the social context of their visits.

## Conclusion

As the literature review shows, graves, cemeteries, and sites associated with death are topical areas for research. In the context of future research, the following aspects should be focused on when analysing dark heritage sites in Latvia (including Holocaust-related death sites) and their use in tourism: geographical location and environment; types of land use; information about the sites; virtual and physical accessibility; how sites are marked and identified as places of death and tragic events; how these places are perceived by the locals; how different tourist groups perceive and experience these places; how these places can be better marked, highlighted and arranged in a sustainable context; how these sites can be planned, managed and directed; and what the host-guest relationships at these sites are.

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## Kopsavilkums

Tūrismā kā visai jaunā zinātņu disciplīnā pētījumi attīstās, izmantojot citu zinātņu nozaru teorijas, atziņas un pieeju. Latvijā ir sākts plašs pētījums par holokausta un ar to saistīto vietu izmantošanu tūrismā. Lai vispusīgi analizētu šīs drūmās vietas kā nāves vietas, šajā rakstā ir apkopoti līdzšinējie pētījumi, kas saistīti ar kapu vietām, kapsētām un traģiskām nāves vietām. Raksta mērķis ir identificēt nāves vietas kā īpašas vietas un ainavas, tostarp apzināt tās kā kultūras ainavas elementus. Vietējo iedzīvotāju attieksmi pret sarežģītās pagātnes vietām, kas saistītas ar sarežģītu pagātnes mantojumu, nav iespējams izprast, nenovērtējot attieksmi pret nāves vietām un kapsētām kultūras kontekstā. Rakstā ir analizēti līdzšinējie pētījumi nekroģeogrāfijā un apkopotas atziņas par ģeogrāfisko pieeju, kas izmantota šādu vietu analizē. Ir raksturota saikne starp vietu kultūras ģeogrāfijā un tūrisma ģeogrāfijā, apzināti Latvijā veiktie pētījumi, identificētas visatbilstošākās drūmā tūrisma definīcijas, kā arī ir raksturotas galvenās problēmas, kas rodas, iesaistot tūrisma piedāvājumā nāves un traģēdiju vietas, it sevišķi, ja tās ir saistītas ar tādiem traģiskiem notikumiem kā holokausts. Noslēgumā ir identificēti galvenie aspekti un pieejas, kas jāizmanto, turpinot pētījumu par holokausta vietu izmantošanu tūrismā.

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