
Chapter 19

Cultivated and constructed memory at the nineteenth-century cemetery of Cagliari

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The cemetery as memory monument

A cemetery is a monument, or rather a collection of monuments, which serves to generate, reinforce, and perpetuate memories. However, that function cannot be easily defined in that it is complex, dynamic, and multifaceted. A cemetery is a vessel for many memories, not only of the recent dead, but also of cities, communities, and cultures. Moreover, the perpetuation of memories is an on-going and evolving process.

The Bonaria Cemetery of Cagliari

This paper represents an attempt to unfold the layers of memory associated with the nineteenth-century cemetery of Bonaria in Cagliari, Sardinia. It explores the construction of memories, and their evolution over time, with an eye to different analytical frameworks pertaining to monuments and memory (mainly: Riegl 1903; Halbwachs 1980; Rossi 1987; Lowenthal 1985; Connerton 1989; Gillis 1994; and Choay 2001).

That the Bonaria cemetery in Cagliari is a rewarding case study is partly because of the fact that it accommodates a range of private and public monuments and their associated meanings. Whereas, on the one hand, a funerary monument is intended to commemorate an individual or a, it also embodies memories regarding the social and political structures that bound the dead into a particular culture, and into alliances based on power and class. In that a tomb is a measure of the economic and socio-political status of the deceased, it carries meanings that relate both to individual remembrance and to the social, or collective, memory (Halbwachs 1980, Chapter 1). In short, a cemetery preserves memories that are both individual and collective, or that relate to the dead, the community, and society. However, the meanings,



Figure 19.1. Cagliari, Bonaria cemetery, monument to Antoniotta Todde Pera (Ambrogio Celi 1879).

or memories, carried by cemeteries and funerary monuments are both re-interpreted, and overlaid, by subsequent generations.

These memories are evident, for example, in the case of a monument at the Bonaria cemetery in Cagliari that was created by Ambrogio Celi in 1879 (Fig. 19.1, Dadea 2011, vol. I, 88-90). That monument was originally erected to the memory of a young mother, Antonietta Todde Pera, who died aged twenty-five, leaving three children. Thus, its main purpose was to commemorate an individual. However, it may also be seen as a monument to an aspiring wealthy bourgeoisie, as reflected in the detailed and realistic depiction of Antonietta's modern and fashionable dress. The sculpture is also a testament to Christian beliefs that are expressed by the presence of an angel. However, as the mother's face carries an expression of mute sorrow rather than the certainty of salvation, this might be taken to suggest the impact of Romanticism, and the attention awarded to private and individual sentiments within nineteenth-century culture (Ariès 1974, 55-84; Ariès 1981, 409-558; Laqueur 2015, 271-312; Malone 2017b, 834-835). Seen in this light, the tomb is a celebration of the virtues of motherhood and the importance of the family in middle-class life. It also records a moment in art history and, more precisely, the period in the latter half of the 1800s when a new style emerged in Italian funerary sculpture. Termed 'bourgeois realism' for its reliance on middle-class patronage, that style was characterised by a shift from the representation of allegorical figures in classical dress, which were typically toga-clad personifications of faith or charity, to the portrayal of real-life characters in contemporary clothes – most often representing the dead and their relatives (Sborgi 1988, 355-62; Berresford 2004, 60-5; Dadea 2011, vol. I, 79; Malone 2017a, 66-80). In this instance, there is also potential evidence of associations with the development of photography in the frozen poses adopted by the figures, which create the appearance of a *tableau vivant* (Sborgi 1988, 388).

Given that the immediate descendants of Antonietta Todde Pera are now also deceased, the monument's original meanings, which were both personal and related to the commemoration of a known individual, have been lost. In effect, it might be assumed that the monument no longer performs its initial function in terms of commemoration and mourning. However, each succeeding generation may re-interpret that monument, adding new memories, and investing it with new meanings that overlay, and eventually replace, those that were tied to its original commemorative purpose. Individual memories might be forgotten, but broader social, historical, and human meanings persist. Thus, a tomb that was once invested with personal memories associated with an individual develops into a monument that may adopt

a succession of meanings within the collective memory – meanings that represent an evolving culture and society. In this respect, a tomb also becomes, over the course of time, a historical monument. That expression is used in the definition coined by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905) in his seminal essay of 1903 entitled, "Der moderne Denkmalkultus: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung", which translates as "The modern cult of monuments: its character and origins" (Riegl 1903, 72; also, Choay 2001). The distinction is that the message of a monument is dictated by its original creators, but the meaning and value of a historical monument are established by later viewers. This implies that, whereas the monument has a deliberate intent, the historical monument is unintentional, or rather it describes the state in which the tomb's original purpose has been superseded by the superimposition of additional, or posthumous, meanings.

The collective cemetery

The definition of private and collective memory, which can be applied to a single monument, may be extended to cemeteries as a whole. As a commemorative site, which aids the process of remembrance, the cemetery 'objectifies' memories, or facilitates the association of memories with objects and places. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) noted that the collective memory of a group can be sited within a material space that is common to that group, and which yields spatial images that aid recollection (Halbwachs 1980, Chapter 4). Similarly, in 1966, while drawing on Walter Benjamin's observations on the capacity of architecture to retain memories, the Italian architectural theorist Aldo Rossi (1931-1997) identified that 'the city is the collective memory of its people' (Rossi 1987, 191). In that respect, it might be argued that the cemetery, as a space whose primary function is the preservation of memories, may serve the collective memory in a manner that is more direct, or more efficient, than the city – largely because of the singularity of its purpose, and the condensed nature of its monuments and the architectural framework within which they are embedded.

The cemetery of Bonaria in Cagliari was particularly suited to act as a monument to the collective memory because of its physical context and historical background. It was established on the south-eastern outskirts of Cagliari in 1827. The site was convenient in that it was relatively flat and undeveloped (Spano 1869, 4). However, it was also historically significant in that the area had, however intermittently, been used

to accommodate the dead over a period of approximately 22 centuries. The Punics, ancient Romans, and early Christians buried their dead within the same ground. Thus, the site was layered with the memories and bones of numerous generations. The nineteenth-century cemetery was built in the area known as Bonaria Hill, which had been the location of a Punic necropolis from around the fourth century BC (Pesce 2000, 89, 159-60; Dadea 2011, vol. I, 21). Excavation has revealed chamber tombs dating from that period that were essentially deep niches, dug into the rock, with well-like openings. Subsequently, between the first and third century AD, the ancient Romans buried their dead within the same area (Dadea 2011, vol. I, 22-3). The Roman tombs that survive range from simple, carved-out graves to subterranean chambers, which house graves, *columbaria* for the placement of urns, and *arcosolia* (or arched niches) for sarcophagi. Other Roman remains include cinerary urns and related stone supports. In some cases, the tombs were surmounted by *cupae*, or semi-cylindrical coverings that functioned to accommodate the ancient ritual of the *refrigerium*, a commemorative banquet held by the relatives of the dead (Dadea 2001, 282-3). Moreover, there is evidence that a number of the tombs were lavishly decorated with frescoes, mosaics, and stucco work. Early Christian tombs dating up to the sixth century were also found on the same site, some with extensive decoration (Vivanet 1892; Pinza 1901; Pani Ermini 1968). Those tombs show that early Christians also placed their dead in graves or *arcosolia*, set within cave-like niches dug into the hill.

A stratigraphy of memory

A map of Cagliari, which shows the location of Punic, Roman, and early Christian tombs, demonstrates how the nineteenth-century cemetery of Bonaria was set on an ancient place of burial (Fig. 19.2). The foundation of the new cemetery, which re-established a tradition that had been dormant since the sixth century, followed from fundamental changes in funerary customs across Europe (Laqueur 2015, 215-238; Malone 2017a, 9-31). In Cagliari, as in most European cities, the ancients and the early Christians buried their dead outside the city walls. This was both a tradition and a legal requirement connected with hygiene. However, that tendency to separate the dead from the living was abandoned in the early middle ages when the Christian Church took control of burial practices. Religious customs encouraged interment within a church, or an adjoining churchyard, as the proximity of the corpse to relics was thought to increase the individual's chance of salvation. Hence, the dead were frequently retained within urban boundaries – a shift which may be dated to the period after the sixth century, when the last, surviving, early Christian tombs were created at Bonaria Hill. However, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a revolution in funerary practices across Europe was engendered, in part, by hygienic concerns and expanding urban populations, but also by cultural changes tied to the Enlightenment, and in particular to changing attitudes to death, a renewed interest in the dignity of man, anticlericalism, and an emergent egalitarianism. The result was the prohibition

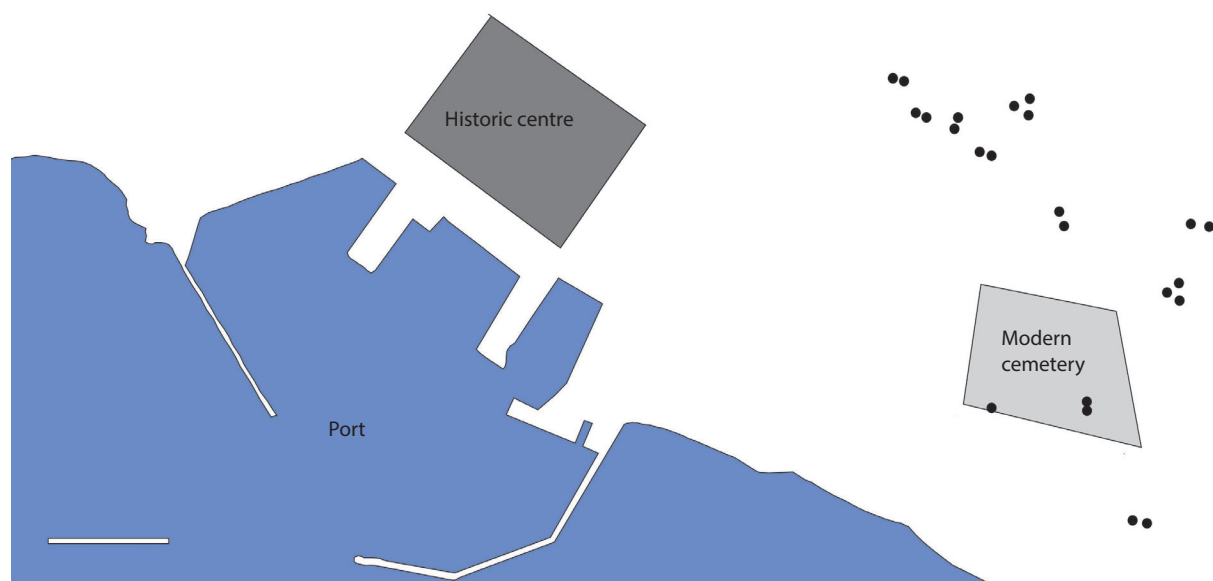


Figure 19.2. Map of Cagliari marking the location of ancient tombs (dots) with respect to the cemetery of Bonaria.



Figure 19.3. *Cagliari, Bonaria cemetery, main chapel (Luigi Damiano, 1828).*

of interment within the city in favour of new suburban cemeteries, and the transfer of responsibility for the dead from the Church to the municipality. This, in the case of Cagliari, meant that burials were removed to the outskirts, and to land that was once the site of an ancient necropolis, and which, in the early nineteenth century, was split between the archbishopric, the convent of Bonaria, and the Boy family.

From its foundation in 1827, the cemetery grew steadily throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its construction proceeded in parallel with archaeological excavations of which perhaps the most notable were undertaken by the archaeologist Giovanni Spano (1803-1878) who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, revealed Punic and Roman tombs that were under the cemetery and nearby churchyard of the Basilica of Bonaria (Spano 1864; Spano 1869 18-23; Dadea 2011, vol. I, 21). Spano, a priest, theologian, and linguist, might be called ‘the father of Sardinian archaeology’ (Dadea 2011, vol. I, 21; Dyson & Rowland 2007, 10). However, the Roman necropolis at Bonaria was excavated as early as 1585,

as part of what may have been the first modern excavations in Sardinia (Dadea 2001, 282; Dadea 2011, vol. I, 22). The expansion of Bonaria cemetery during the 1800s prompted further digs, which uncovered Roman and early Christian tombs (Crespi 1863). Of particular importance was the discovery, in 1888, of two early Christian burial chambers of the fourth century AD, which were remarkably well preserved and richly adorned with frescoes. These archaeological investigations were part of concerted efforts to harness the historical value of the location, and enhance the significance of the new cemetery. By drawing on the past, the promoters of the nineteenth-century cemetery sought to establish a sense of continuity, and thereby re-enforce the identity of the local community (Connerton 1989, 12; Malone 2017a, 118). In 1869, the archaeologist Giovanni Spano published the first monograph on the history of the cemetery (Spano 1869). Moreover, that work was part of a vast literature relating to the burial ground that was written during the nineteenth century, and which ranged from artistic manuals, to guides for tourists, and articles in



Figure 19.4. Cagliari, Bonaria cemetery, monument to Enrico Serpieri (Sisto Galavotti, 1876).

local newspapers and specialised journals. Together with the excavations, that literature contributed to a process of ‘monumentalisation’, whereby the cemetery was invested with history, and with collective memories that were associated with the dead, the community, and the city. In short, the archaeological efforts, together with other generative elements of local culture, shaped the cemetery’s role as a historical monument, and as a place of collective memories. In turn, the importance accorded to the cemetery contributed to its gradual development through a combination of private and public investment, as the local authority built an ever-expanding architectural framework within which private sponsorship gave rise to an increasing number of monuments.

Associations with antiquity were given emphasis in the architecture of the nineteenth-century cemetery through the adoption of a neoclassical style for both the main buildings and a number of the monuments, and also in the revival of the *columbarium*, as a system of stacking the dead that had been employed by the ancient Romans (Malone 2017a, 40, 152-153). In the

initial design for the cemetery, the military engineer Luigi Damiano followed the Italian tradition of the Campo Santo, or cloistered burial ground, in that he created a rectangular, arcaded, court that was clad in the Tuscan order. The cemetery was entered via a recessed Tuscan portal that led into an avenue and on to an Ionic chapel, built in 1828 (Fig. 19.3). The choice of the neoclassical style reflected its dominance in Italian architecture in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, the architectural character of the cemetery was also partly determined by the superimposed niches of the nineteenth-century *columbaria*, of which the first were built in 1866. The *columbarium* represented an efficient, space-saving, solution to the demand for burials that resulted from an increasing population (Spano 1869, 16), but it also suggested a reference to the ancient Roman *arcosolium* – examples of which were excavated nearby.

The historical legacy of the new cemetery at Bonaria bolstered its role as monument, which served both political and social purposes. During the nineteenth century, the cemetery operated as

an instrument of politics in a period of turmoil and radical change within Italy. The Risorgimento, or the Italian struggle for independence, brought a jigsaw of minor states, each with its own administration and distinctive cultural identity, under a unified nation-state established in 1861. As in other major Italian cities, the cemetery at Cagliari contributed to political ends as its monumental architecture expressed the power of the city within the fledgling nation. As a destination for tourists, it was the object of national and international interest, and a focus of civic pride (Spano 1869, 24). It was part of an assumed heritage that was aimed at the enhancement of national and local life, and the promotion of civic values (Lowenthal in Gillis 1994, 45). Moreover, like the many monumental cemeteries that sprung up all over Italy during the nineteenth century, the burial ground at Bonaria functioned as a monument that fostered nationalism and an emergent civic consciousness (Malone 2017a, 107-126). It was, as were other Italian monumental cemeteries, a major element of an emergent collective memory that had specific political overtones. For instance, at Cagliari and in other Italian cities, special areas were designated within the cemetery for the commemoration of national heroes, as exemplified by a monument of 1885 that celebrated those who died while fighting for the establishment of the nation (Dadea 2011, vol. II, 75). Built by the local Società dei Reduci delle Patrie Battaglie, an association of veterans of the Italian struggle for independence that was established after unification, the monument of 1885 was intended to fuel patriotism, encourage civic virtue, and contribute to the creation of an appropriate history of the new nation. In that the monument was inscribed with the names of soldiers from the military expeditions of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian Wars of Independence, the Crimean War, and Italy's earliest colonial campaigns, the epitaphs read like a history of the Risorgimento, and of the first military efforts of the new nation. Essentially, such monuments contributed to the construction of a national identity by creating a shared memory of the dead (Gillis 1994, 8). Later, the process of generating history also led to the creation of the cemetery's Viale degli Eroi (Avenue of the Heroes), a stretch of wall flanked by monuments to those who fought in the First World War, which was defined in contemporary Italian propaganda as the Fourth (and last) war of the Risorgimento. Further evidence of the impact of the forces of nation-building may be found in Bonaria's private monuments. For instance, a detail of the tomb of Enrico Serpieri (1809-72), created by Sisto Galavotti in 1876, also reflects the historical events of the Risorgimento (Fig. 19.4, Dadea 2011,



Figure 19.2. Cagliari, Bonaria cemetery, chapel of the **Birocchi Silvetti Berola** family (Giuseppe Sartorio and Giovanni Battista Troiani, 1891).

vol. I, 82). Enrico Serpieri's tomb depicts an episode in the history of the Roman Republic, a short-lived democratic government that was established in Rome in 1849 after an insurrection reduced the power of the Papacy. Serpieri, as a member of the Republican assembly, is shown resisting the French army that was sent by Napoleon III to restore papal power. A bas-relief creates a theatrical stage that casts the deceased Serpieri as a major player in a significant event in national history, when the French gained access into the Republican Parliament to arrest its members. Originally from the region of Romagna, following the fall of the revolutionary government, Serpieri opted for political exile in Sardinia where he profited handsomely from the mining industry. It is interesting, however, that Serpieri's monument depicts a moment in his life that represents the historical events of 1849, thereby adding to the narrative of national history.

The cemetery as expression of social change

In addition to its role as a tool for propaganda that served the creation of a new nation, the Italian monumental cemetery was also an expression of social change during the nineteenth century (Laqueur 2015, 288-305; Malone 2017a, 57-65). Legislation was introduced into Cagliari in 1830 that abolished interment in churches and private chapels, and determined that all social groups (with the initial exception of the clergy) were to be buried within the public cemetery, which thus became socially inclusive. Differences in economic or social status were reflected in the capacity to acquire burial plots and to erect monuments. Hence, the new cemetery mirrored the nature of urban social structures and shifts in the redistribution of power, albeit in a condensed, or purified, form. The cemetery also offered an emergent bourgeoisie a platform on which, through the creation of lavish monuments, individuals and families could assert their status and newfound socio-economic position.

Throughout Europe, prior to the reforms in burial practices that emerged during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, a decorated tomb was a privilege generally reserved for the aristocracy. As family chapels were passed down from generation to generation, burial within a church tended to be restricted to the nobility. However, the creation of public cemeteries on the outskirts of cities from the early 1800s offered the middle classes the chance of an adorned grave. Moreover, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, a period of economic prosperity, industrialisation, and urban growth, spurred the rise of a wealthy urban bourgeoisie, for which the cemetery represented an arena for both intimate and social forms of expression. This resulted in the production of numerous tombs and monuments, and statuary that combined emotive expressions of grief with the display of luxurious clothing, elaborate *coiffeurs*, and sentiments that exalted the bourgeois ideals of family and work. Given the richness and variety of their monuments, cemeteries were destined to become museums for nineteenth-century sculpture. For instance, the cemetery of Bonaria offers many examples of bourgeois realist statuary, such as the monument to the entrepreneur Vittorio Raspi (Ambrogio Celi 1881), which offers a realistic 'snapshot' of contemporary life. Raspi's wife, who may have commissioned the sculpture, is portrayed as a visitor to the cemetery, and is shown dressed in her finest mourning clothes as she leaves a wreath at the foot of the tomb of the deceased (Dadea 2011, vol. I, 90). Similarly, the chapel of the Birocchi Silvetti Berola family of 1891, decorated by the sculptor Giuseppe Sartorio (1854-?1922) embodies an interpretation of a domestic

bourgeois interior (Fig. 19.5, Dadea 2011, vol. I, 112-3). The power of the bourgeois realist style was such that it was also taken up by members of the aristocracy. For example, generations of the noble Cugia family were depicted, in the 1870s and 1880s, by the sculptors Tito Sarrocchi (1824-1900) and Giovanni Pandiani (1809-1879) in a manner that, in 1875, led the latter's work to be scornfully described by one observer as 'mercantile art' (Vivanet 1875, 4). However, the values inherent in nineteenth-century Italian funerary sculpture, which was created through the patronage of the middle classes, were evidently bourgeois in that common themes were rooted in the exhibition of wealth, the myth of the 'self-made man', the celebration of professional achievements, and the nuclear family. In fact, through these funerary monuments, the identity of the new social group was committed to collective memory.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that Bonaria cemetery exemplifies the construction of memory through the creation of monuments. Architecture, archaeology, and their supporting literature underscored the site's heritage as an ancient burial place. Associations with the past consecrated, and bolstered, the role of the cemetery as a monument that preserved, and transmitted, both individual and collective memories. Whereas, through its monuments, Bonaria cemetery imposed individual remembrance upon posterity, it also functioned to promote the passage of collective memories between generations. Moreover, in commemorating the dead, it helped to allay the individual's fear of annihilation while promoting a sense of permanence, which strengthened the common memory and the identity of a community. Arguably, those functions were particularly important in nineteenth-century Italy, when momentous changes were taking place within its political and social frameworks. In that context, the cemetery acted as a monument to an emergent social group, to a fledgling nation-state, and to the city of Cagliari as it moved through a shifting political landscape. Its monuments sanctioned socio-economic and political developments by establishing relationships between the present and the past. Thus, the cemetery at Bonaria illustrates the manner in which memory is generated, and is eventually overlaid by new memories. As the archaeologist Giovanni Spano suggested in 1869 'the most remarkable aspect of the cemetery at Cagliari is [...] that many of the graves of our ancestors, after twenty or maybe thirty centuries or more, now enclose the bodies of their descendants (Spano 1869, 16-7)'.

Translations from Italian are by the author.