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Churchyard Archaeology

Churchyards, the external burial grounds associated with Christian places of worship, can inform a wide range of social, economic, religious, and demographic issues which are fundamental to historical archaeology. Historic churchyards are explored through three primary methods: churchyard survey, excavation of the burials themselves, and recording the monuments that mark burials (Rodwell 2005, 161).

Churchyard survey and planning often stand on their own as methods, revealing complex relationships between the burial ground, monuments, buildings, topographic features, and the wider landscape (Mytum 2000, 137). Planning is also the first stage of excavation or monument recording, and geophysical survey can either help target excavation or serve as an alternative (Kerns-Nocerito 2002). Due to the complex stratigraphy and the ethical considerations of disturbing comparatively recent graves, churchyard excavations are generally limited to redundant churches or rescue situations (e.g. Brickley 2006; Mays, et al. 2007), underscoring the importance of non-destructive survey as a research tool.

Monument recording provides essential information about memorial production and consumption, burial location, churchyard development, and local populations. However, it is also a vital tool of preservation, as historic graveyards lack statutory protection, and monuments are under constant threat of decay, movement, and loss. The recording, classification, and interpretation of churchyard monuments was pioneered in North American archaeology (e.g. Deetz and Dethlefsen 1972), but the field has advanced substantially in both method and theory, such as in innovating and standardizing recording benchmarks (Mytum 2000, 2004), and in developing interpretations beyond status and economy, considering emotion, identity, and audience (Tarlow 1999).

Increasingly, projects integrating above- and below-ground archaeology have delivered the most noteworthy advancements in understanding historic burial practice (e.g. Mytum 2007, Tarlow 2011). Comprehensive non-destructive recording and survey is the standard methodology in modern churchyard archaeology, but where judicious excavation is feasible and ethically justifiable, or previously excavated data can be reassessed, a combination of the three approaches offers considerable potential.

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