Biblical Quotations in Latvian Cemetery Epitaphs

1. Introduction

Gravecare and tending traditions have a significant place in Latvian culture, which is proved by the fact that these traditions have been included in the Latvian Cultural Canon established in 2008. In summer, the so-called Cemetery Festivals (in Latvian Kapusvētki) are very popular, taking place all over Latvia, and in autumn, memorial candle eves are celebrated (in Latvian Svecīšu vakars). It is a custom to visit the relatives’ graves on a regular basis, to maintain them in good order, to decorate them with fresh flowers and shrubs and to look after the graves in the way that is related to traditions in decorative and landscape gardening. Gravestones and epitaphs written on them obviously have their place in the cemetery landscape.

The memorial inscriptions on Latvian gravestones have been researched very sporadically up to this time and no scholarly monograph on the Latvian epitaph texts has been published so far. The present study is based on a wide material of the Latvian memorial inscriptions covering the time period from the 19th to the 21st century. The bulk of materials obtained come from the Archives of Latvian Folklore, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia (collection LFK [2101]), as well as the author’s private collection.

An epitaph (Latin epitaphium <Greek ἔπιτάφιος ‘over the grave’; ἔπιτάφιος (λόγος) ‘oration over the grave’) is an inscription on the memorial sign in the burial place, a gravestone, a memorial tablet, a tombstone, a cross, etc. An epitaph is also a genre of poetry on its own beyond the cemetery culture. It is a remembrance.

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1 This research has been supported by the European Social Fund within the project “Cultures within a Culture: Politics and Poetics of Border Narratives”.
poem dedicated to the dead person, usually a brief composition to honour the deceased mentioning their merits and virtues during their lifetimes. The origins of both modes of epitaphs, the inscription and the remembrance poem, can be found in ancient Greece. This poetic genre, borrowed from Antiquity, was resurrected in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, bloomed in the Classical Period, was practiced in Romanticism and later on as well. Poetic epitaphs were influenced by cultural and literary processes in every period and therefore the features of Classicism, Sentimentalism, Romanticism, Socialist Realism and even Postmodernism can be found in the poetics of the epitaph texts.

Due to the fact that epitaphs appear both in fiction and in memorial inscriptions, Russian literary scholars Tat'jana Car'kova and Sergej Nikolaev have divided the genre in two subgenres according to their location in the respective cultural field: 1) literary or ‘fiction’ epitaphs (which exist only within the boundaries of a poetic work); 2) real epitaphs (which can be read only at a particular burial place). The core function of both the ‘fictitious’ and the real epitaphs is a form of commemoration established by written means. There is migration between the epitaphs in fiction and the real epitaphs. Sometimes the poets have been inspired by the real epitaphs and have used certain motives in their works in the genres of epitaph, prayer, elegy and others. However, a more common procedure is borrowing literary quotations for real epitaphs. As has been noted by Tat'jana Car'kova, transforming creative works into clichéd cemetery epitaphs was a popular phenomenon in the 19th and 20th centuries. Although there is a variety of subgenres and forms of poetry used for cemetery epitaphs, sometimes the epitaph text from fiction and its variations become an often-cited epitaph text in cemeteries. When the real epitaphs borrow the texts from the ‘fiction’ epitaphs, the context of the poetry and the actual addressee of the epitaph change. The ‘fiction’ epitaphs represent the poetry of authors, whereas the real epitaphs must be viewed as a folk text of a traditional culture with its own artistic system where one of the typical techniques is quoting.

The Bible and religious lyrics are among the most favoured sources of quotations for the real epitaphs both in Latvia and other Christian regions, as it has been revealed in various collections and studies of inscriptions.

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6 Eadem, 141. lpp.
The presence of the Bible, folklore, literary criticism and epigraphy as well as individual literary works in Latvian cemeteries is a testimony to the cultural diversity in this specific cultural environment.

2. Historical Background

The tradition of epitaphs in the territory of Latvia goes back to the 16th century. The memorial tablets decoratively and textually elaborated by the knights and clergymen of the Livonian Order differed from the inscriptions on the Latvian burial stones. A cemetery as an ensemble of graves of several families is a rather recent phenomenon in the territory of Latvia. Pēteris Šmits admits that Latvians started to introduce joint kinship cemeteries only around the 16th century. It is said that the cemeteries in Riga and in the entire Latvia were very neglected up to the end of the 18th century when the Moravian Church took care of the graves. They started to pay tending visits, decorated the graves with flowers and wreaths. A simple stake was replaced by a wooden cross with an engraved phrase from the Bible.

The epitaph tradition in Latvian cemeteries both in the beginning and in later development stages to a great extent has been influenced by the Baltic German cemetery culture. Gradual consolidation of writing (since the 17th century), growth of national consciousness and the example of the German cemetery culture facilitated the development of Latvian epitaphs. The skilfully made epitaph tablets ordered by Baltic Germans in churches and especially in family burial grounds served as an example to be imitated in Latvian burial grounds. In Latvian epitaphs, the imitation method was chosen; it is contrary to marginalisation, which is another mode of popular culture’s existence next to the ‘high culture’. However, the dynamic following of this art that is so evident in the Baltic German burial grounds cannot be observed in the cemeteries of Latvian peasants. In turn, the Baltic German culture through imitation simplified the most outstanding patterns of European memorial sculpture and architecture. The models of monuments of Italian Renais-

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12 Šmits P., Miršana un bēres, [no:] Latvju tautas dainas, R. Klaustiņš (sak.), Riga 1932, 10. sēj., 781 lpp.
sance, reaching the Baltic States via Poland, were simplified and the local German customers and stoncutters adjusted them to their own taste. It is especially evident in the memorial sculptural tablets immersed in the altar floors and walls of the country churches. From the Baltic German cemetery tradition Latvians adopted the praxis to dedicate their own words to honour the deceased person, to use quotations from the Bible for the epitaphs, as well as to decorate the graves with flowers.

Latvian grave signs initially consisted of a wooden triangle with a simple inscription, but in the 19th century they were supplemented or replaced with a wooden cross. In the epitaph carvings of the wooden tablets, the so-called naïve calligraphy can be observed: the letters are cut in a pompous handwriting font, which tended to imitate the professional woodcarvings.

In Latvia, people started to treat the cemeteries similarly to carefully designed parks in the beginning of the 20th century, and in the 20th century the texts of Latvian epitaphs became more complex, as great attention was paid to the poetics of these verses. At the turn of the 19th century a tendency to demonstrate the social status of the deceased person culminated in Latvian cemetery culture (especially in Riga). The social contrasts between the inhabitants of the centre and suburbs of the city were manifested in the memorial architecture. In 1909, the Director of Riga parks and the landscape architect Georg Kuphaldt turned against the custom to arrange sepulchres, metal fencing and concrete casings in the cemeteries. Under his leadership, the democratisation of cemeteries in Riga was carried out. He replaced the pretentious architecture with hedges and ornamental trees. The cemeteries in the cities (and later in the rural areas) were designed as parks. This aesthetic approach in the planning of Latvian cemeteries has been preserved till now.

Because in the extension of cemeteries general landscape requirements had to be obeyed, memorial signs were designed without unnecessary exaggeration. Quite similar crosses, tablets and gravestones were chosen. Artistic originality was only expressed in the form of memorial monuments. Along with the introduction of unified requirements for cemetery architecture, the memorial texts, too, were composed in a traditional manner. Thus, the inscriptions became more and more similar

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20 Ibidem, 39. lpp.
to each other. One and the same epitaph texts migrated from one grave to another making textual patterns. They functioned and still do function both as informative and aesthetic folk text units.

Contemporary Latvian memorial signs in cemeteries are mostly made of polished granite in a rectangular or irregular shape. Marble, sandstone, wood, concrete, iron, cast iron, bronze or zinc details for memorial signs are used on fewer occasions. Although memorial tablets dominate, there are other architectural and sculptural forms, too, such as gravestones, memorial monuments, obelisks, crosses, and imitations of ancient Latvian memorial signs.

On the surface of the memorial sign, usually on one side, an inscription is made to honour the deceased person. The epitaph text is chosen by the customer, whereas the engraving is carried out by the stoncutters. Most often epitaphs are engraved in block capital letters. To a great extent, the graphic location of the text on the memorial sign is adapted to the shape and form of the particular plane.

3. The Bible in Epitaphs

The deceased person is paid tribute with the use of the quotations in the general epitaph text. Intertextual quotations are optional (many memorial signs are very formal, laconic, without quotations), they are an addition to the “passport details” of the inscription, such as the name, surname, the year of birth and death, etc.

The ethics of the real or cemetery epitaphs requires that the author of the poetic part in the inscription – neither famous, nor little known – is not mentioned.\(^{21}\) The condition of the anonymity of the author is obeyed in most epitaphs. Anonymous texts migrate from one epitaph to another, and a biblical text, too, despite the fact that it can be recognised by the reader better, is often without any indication to a specific canonical text.

Biblical texts in Latvian epitaphs have been used in various periods of time with different intensity. In the second half of the 19th century almost each epitaph was supplemented with quotations from the New Testament with a promise of resurrection as a positive perspective into life after death. As can be detected from the memorial inscriptions preserved up to nowadays, the thematic choice of the epitaph texts in the first half of the 20th century was varied – along religious motives there was often a praise of the virtues of the deceased person, a remembrance promise or mourning of relatives. During the Soviet occupation usage of biblical texts in Latvian cemeteries sharply decreased: the systematic atheist propaganda

\(^{21}\) Царькова Т. С., К дискуссии о “письменном фольклоре” (Литературные начала в реальной стихотворной эпитафии), [в:] Славянские чтения, Издательство Латгальского культурного центра, Даугавпилс & Резекне 2000, т. 1, с. 14–15.
had influenced the Latvian cemetery culture very much, both the funeral and grave
tending traditions. Since the Restoration of the Independence in the 1990s, the
Bible became a favourite source of Latvian epitaphs again.

As far as the usage of biblical texts is concerned, four levels can be distin-
guished according to the distance or alienation from the original source: (1) direct
biblical quotations (with and without a reference to the source); (2) individual and
liturgical prayers (in an ordinary procedure of the public worship as well as in
special funeral and memorial rituals); (3) church songs (usually quoted from song
books); (4) usage of biblical characters and motives in other texts (individual pray-
ers, religious poetry, etc.). Beyond the cemetery culture, there is a practical relation
among the texts of the distinguished four levels. Biblical quotations are included
both in the liturgical prayers and church songs. Often, through combining several
biblical quotations a prayer is created. For example, in the first part of the Catholic
prayer “Hail Mary!” (in Latin: *Ave Maria!* ) two fragments of the Gospel according
to St Luke have been merged: the speech of Archangel Gabriel at the moment of
annunciation (Luke 1:28) and Elisabeth’s greeting when Maria visits her
(Luke 1:42).

In the *direct biblical quotations* fragments from psalms and gospels have
been used for epitaphs more or less precisely. The quoted fragments entail eschato-
logical issues expressed in the hope of resurrection. In the retrospection upon life,
the significance of divine virtues – faith, hope and love – have been emphasized.

“Tu esi mana cerība, Kungs, mana drošība no pašas manas jaunības. Ps. 71. 5”
[For you give me confidence, O Lord; O Lord, I have trusted in you since I was young. Ps 71: 5]
(LFK 2101, 11 650; Alūksne cemetery)

“Es zinu tavu mīlestību, tavu ticību un tavu pacietību. Jāņa par. gr. 2. 19”
[I know your love, faith, service, and steadfast endurance. Rev . 2. 19]
(LFK 2101, 3405; Smiltene Evangelic Lutheran cemetery)

“Es esmu augšāmcelšanās un dzīvība. kas man tic, dzīvībā, arī ja tas mirs.”
[I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me will live even if he dies.]23
(LFK 2101, 3565; Baloži cemetery in Jelgava)

*Es esmu augšāmcelšanās un dzīvība. Jēzus*
[I am the resurrection and the life. Jesus ]24
(LFK 2101, 6912; Liepāja Central cemetery)

22 See a typical example of atheistic propaganda: *Treicis A., Pavadot pēdējā gaitā, [no:] Svētku varavik-
sne: Tradiciju godagrāmata*, Liesma, Rīga 1972, 284. lpp.
23 Vide: John 11:25.
24 Sk. turpat.
In direct biblical quotations, a variance of the reference source is allowed. Thus, for example, it is possible to introduce grammatical variations adapting the biblical text to the number of the deceased persons:

“Ticību esam turējuši, Tecēšanu pabeiguši.”
[We have kept the faith, We have finished the walk.]\(^{25}\)  
(LFK 2101, 6856; Liepāja Central cemetery)

The biblical quotation that is most often used and can be found in almost every cemetery is “Mīlestība nekad nebeidzas” [Love never ends] – the definition of love provided by Paul the Apostle (1 Cor. 13:8). This quotation has many variations in the epigraphy of Latvian cemeteries. For instance: “Mīlestība nekad nezuđis” [Love will never end] (LFK 2101, 6719; Liepāja Central cemetery); “Mīlestība nekad nebeidzas, / Tā dzīvo mūsu bērnu dvēselēs” [Love never ends, / It lives in the souls of our children.] (LFK 2101, 16 835; Saulkrasti cemetery).

The quotations of *liturgical prayers* for the epitaph texts have been chosen both from regular Lutheran or Catholic public worship proceedings and from special funeral and memorial services, prayers dedicated to the deceasing person, Catholic prayers and psalm readings at the coffin of the deceased person. The texts of daily prayers in the epitaphs are represented by the Lord’s Prayer – “Tavs prāts lai notiek” [Thy will be done] (LFK 2101, 12 625; Priediena cemetery in Durbe). The priest’s prayer that is spoken when receiving the Holy Communion has been quoted as well:\(^{26}\) “Kristus miesa lai pasargā mani / mūžgai dzīvei, Kristus asinis lai pasargā mani mūžgai dzīvei” [May the body of Christ bring me to everlasting life; may the blood of Christ bring me to everlasting life] (LFK 2101, 3765; Zanderu cemetery in Jelgava). In Kalupes cemetery, the poetic part of the epitaph consists of the lines from the Catholic Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus:\(^{27}\) “Jezus, mysu dzeive un augšancelšonōs, apsažāloj par mums!” [Heart of Jesus, our life and resurrection, have mercy on us!] (LFK 2101, 10 865; Kalupes cemetery). Quoting the Latvian translation of the introductory parts of the *Requiem* of the Catholic funeral Mass “Requiem aeternam dona eis (defunctis), Domine, et lux perpretua luceat eis!” [Eternal rest, grant unto him/her O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him/her. May s/he rest in peace.]\(^{28}\) is quite popular, too. For example: “Mūžīgo mieru dod viņiem, Kungs!” (LFK 2101, 17 441; Kurmene cemetery); “Miužeigu mīru viņiem, o Kungs!” (LFK 2101, 15 995; Skuteļi cemetery);

\(^{25}\) Cf. 2 Tim. 4:7: “I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith!”  
\(^{26}\) Slavējiet Kungu: Līgšanu un dziesmu grāmata katolīkiem, Rīgas Metropolijas kūrija, Rīga 1989, 33. lpp.  
\(^{27}\) Ibidem, 125. lpp.  
“Myužeigo gaisma lai speid viņai” (LFK 2101, 16 866; Lauči cemetery). As one can see, different textual variations have been created for the translation of the Requiem.

In the poetic part of the epitaphs individual prayers of simple structure can also be found: “Dievs, piedod” [Forgive me, God] (LFK 2101, 9227; Rencēni cemetery); “Apžēlojies par mani, Dievs” [Be merciful to me, God] (LFK 2101, 13 294; Šķēļu cemetery in Murmastiene). A peculiar epitaph text has been created at Kalupe cemetery: the relatives of the deceased person are asked to pray for the deceased person’s soul. Besides, it is indicated that the preferable prayer is “The Angelus”: “Lai gul ikš mira! Lydz radnes un pazejstamu por jo dwèseli uprejt “Engels Kunga” [Let him sleep in peace! Asking his relatives and acquaintances to pray for his soul “The Angelus”] (LFK 2101, 10 951; Kalupe cemetery).

In memorial inscriptions, the liturgical blessing formulae have been used which are very close to other wish formulae in epitaphs. For example: “Dusiet Dieva mierā!” [Rest in God’s peace!] (LFK 2101, 9279b; Timmu cemetery in Jaunmuiza); “Lai Dievs tevi svētī!” [God bless you!] (LFK 2101, 17 071; Lācupe cemetery in Riga); “Kristus žēlsirdība lai ir ar jums, dārgie vecāki!” [Let Christ’s mercy be with you, dear parents!] (LFK 2101, 16 980; Ziepniekalna cemetery in Riga); “Miers ar jums!” [Peace be with you!] (LFK 2101, 5707a; Melnsils cemetery); “Lai Dievs sargā jūsu miert!” [Let God guard your peace!] (LFK 2101, 3278; Bāru Hill cemetery in Pļaviņas).

In Latvian cemetery epitaphs, the lines of church songs – usually the initial stanzas – are often quoted. The different repertoire of church songs in the epitaphs reveal the affiliation of the deceased person to a certain Christian confession: the relatives of the deceased person quote the text published in a hymnal of their confession. Examples of Catholic songs in the memorial texts: “Ved mūs pie Dieva, ak Marija!” [Take us to God, oh Maria!]29 (LFK 2101, 16 642; Dubļukalns cemetery); “Jēzu, Jēzu, Jēzu, gaisma mūžīgā, / Neatstāj, Kungs, mūs nāves tumsībā” [Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, the eternal light, / Do not leave us, Master, in the darkness of death]30 (LFK 1201, 11 989a; Alūksne cemetery); “Augšā aiz zvārām tu gaisma reiz kļūsi” [Up there

29 Vide: Slavējiet Kungu ..., 553. lpp.
30 Vide: ibidem, 540. lpp.
32 Vide: ibidem, 553. dziesma
behind the stars you will become a light] \(^{33}\) (Alūksne cemetery); “Tā sirds nav pazaudēta, / Kas Kristum novēlēta” [That heart is not lost, / Which is dedicated to Christ] \(^{34}\) (LFK 1201, 11 807; Alūksnes cemetery). Also, common song stanzas shared by the Catholics and Lutherans are quoted: “Tuvāk pie Dieva klūt / Sirds ilgojas” [To be closer to God / The heart is yearning] \(^{35}\) (LFK 1201, 13 360; Ķinderu cemetery in Cesvaine).

**Usage of biblical characters and motives** in the epitaph texts is characteristic of the largest group of memorial inscriptions. Revealing a high degree of alienation from the original, that is, from the Bible, the epitaphs of this group present abundant variety both in terms of contents and length of text. For example:

“Ardievu, iznīcīgā pasaule! / Mēs steidzamies uz dzimteni, / Uz mājām, kur enģļi izglābto dvēseli sveic. / Tik debesīs dvēsele laime var zelt, / Tik mūžībā miers ir svēts. / Tur sāpes vairs nespiedīs mūs, / Miers svēts būs tur. / Mēs steidzamies, / Pestītājs rokas pretī mums sniedz.”

[Farewell, the decaying world! / We are rushing to the homeland, / To home where angels greet the saved soul. / Only in heaven the soul can flourish in happiness, / Only in eternity peace is sacred. / There we will be free of pain, / Peace will be sacred there. / We are rushing, / The Saviour reaches out his hands to us.]

(LFK 1201, 16 475; Skulte cemetery)

“Kā plaukstošs ziediņš tu jau viši salnā / Un mirstot teici to: “Kur āmen?” / Nu, dārgo mīlulīt, lai Dievs dod skatīt Tev godību, kur mājo Tas, kā vārds ir Āmen. / Tur enģļu pulcijā skan tava balstīņa / Ar debess koklēm apskaidrotās rociņās, / Bet mūs Dievs uztur ticībā un nišestībā, / Līdz nākam Tēva mājās, kur atkal tiksimies.”

[As a flower in bloom you withered in frost / And, when dying, you said: “Where is amen?” / Now, my dear sweetie, let the God make you see / The glory, where the one, whose name is Amen, lives. / There among angels your voice will be heard / With heavenly kokles\(^{36}\) in the little enlightened hands, / But God keeps us in faith and love, / Until we return to our Father’s home, where we shall meet again.]

(LFK 1201, 16 706; Saulkrasti cemetery).

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\(^{33}\) Vide: ibidem, 543. dziesma.

\(^{34}\) Vide: ibidem, 579. dziesma.

\(^{35}\) Vide: ibidem, 502. dziesma; Slavējiet Kungu ..., 539. lpp.

\(^{36}\) Kokles is a traditional Latvian string instrument.
Poetry that is based on the Christian world perception and abounds with various biblical motives and characters can be qualified as religious poetry. In Latvian cemetery epitaphs religious poetry was widely used in the first half of the 20th century (in memorial inscriptions, “our greatest religious poets” were then drawn upon for the texts most often: Jānis Poruks (1871–1911), Augusts Saulietis (1869–1933), Ludis Bērziņš (1870–1965), Anna Brigadere (1861–1933)). Religious poetry can be found in the epitaphs later, too. Biblical allusions can be easily recognized due to a specific mode of expression and characters. The Latvian translations of the Bible from the 17th century up to the present times have been rooted in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition, which has made the Bible different from other texts in the Latvian language over the centuries.

4. Other Sources of Quotations

Next to biblical texts the most popular sources of quotations for epitaphs in Latvian cemeteries are Latvian folksongs and poetry, as well as aphoristic sentences. On the basis of their observations in Riga Meža cemetery in the 1980s, the Polish philologists – Jacek and Stanisław Franciszek Kolbuszewski have come to the conclusion that Latvian poetic epigraphy manifests a high level artistry and at the same time reveals close connections with both Latvian literary poetry and Latvian folk poetry.  

Latvian folksongs have been cited fully and partially – as trochaic or dactylic quatrains and distiches. The poetry chosen for memorial inscriptions on gravestones thematically represents mostly folksongs about death, funeral rites, the songs from the orphans’ cycle, as well as songs about relationships between parents and children. In certain epitaphs on soldiers’ gravestones war songs have been quoted (they have been transformed into the so-called fatherland’s songs).

Folksongs, similarly to biblical texts and poems, have been modified in epitaphs in various ways (although there have been cases of completely accurately quoted excerpts from folksongs). Modifications of the texts of folksongs can be minimal, with the so-called text vibration – “insignificant, inessential changes that are focused on the content of a certain song”. A tendency to create new versions

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of the text by using folksongs as a source text can also be noted in memorial inscriptions. On such occasions the metrics of the classical folksongs have been followed and the formulae of words have been imitated. Such falsification of a folkloristic text as a method of creating the poetic part in memorial inscriptions combines the intention to use the forms of classical folksongs and a personal text, which very often is oversaturated with sentimentality. The term ‘fakelore’ coined by American folklorist Richard Mercer Dorson can be referred to such analogues of folklore.  

Poetry is the dominating source of the poetic part in the epitaphs of Latvian cemeteries. In the memorial inscriptions of the 20th century quotations from poetry exceed the usage frequency of biblical texts and folksongs. The memorial inscriptions have a direct relation to Latvian literary heritage and especially lyrical poetry. Usually a fragment of a longer poem is included in epitaphs – some lines or a stanza. Quotations from the works of Latvian poets and adoptions from other epitaphs facilitate the formation of new memorial inscriptions over and over again. Thus, both accurate poetry quotations and transformed texts exist side by side.

Although due to the fact that the condition of anonymity is followed in the genre of epitaphs and thus it is not possible to determine the source of quotations completely accurately, it can be noted that a considerable part of memorial inscriptions has been included in the compilations of mourning lyrics.

Poems, which have been selected as sources of quotations in epitaphs, form an extensive repertoire of cemetery lyrics. In epitaphs the poetry of some authors is especially favoured and often quoted. Frīcis Bārda (1880–1919) and Ārija Elksne (1928–1984) are among the authors who have been cited most in the memorial inscriptions on gravestones.

From time to time the texts of poetry or songs appear in the memorial inscriptions. The texts have been borrowed from the popular songs of the time. Most of the quoted songs can be qualified as popular songs (zīņģes) (“(...) popular songs (zīņģes) are poetry created by poets of various periods of time for singing
purposes; popular songs are highly regarded, sung and loved by people*44). They can be found in the compilations of national songs.45 There is a special repertoire of songs cited in epitaphs, which have an encoded significance in relation to particular political circumstances, for example, the Revolution of 1905 and the Third Awakening of Latvia, which has been called the Singing Revolution.

Thus, one can see the vivid textual creativity of the epitaphs, which proves that the tradition of memorial inscription in Latvia is not fixed. On the contrary, it is fluid and keeps the track of time and change.

Abstract (Summary)

The article is part of a wider study on Latvian cemetery epitaphs which is being carried out by Rita Treija at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia. The source of the study is a wide material of the Latvian tombstone inscriptions covering the time period from the 19th to the 21st century. The bulk of materials obtained comes from the Archives of Latvian Folklore as well as the author’s private collection. The author seeks to analyse the multilayered nature of the memorial inscriptions on gravestones both from a philologist’s and folklorist’s perspective, focusing mainly on the use of biblical quotations and allusions in the epitaph textual tradition.

The textual analysis of Latvian cemetery epitaphs shows that the Bible is an important source of reference used both directly and indirectly in the composition of the memorial texts for the deceased. There are four levels that can be distinguished according to the distance from the original source: (1) direct biblical quotations (with or without references to particular verses of the Scripture); (2) liturgical prayers (excerpted from the ordinary procedure of the public worship, as well as from special funeral and memorial rituals); (3) church songs (quoted from the Roman Catholic or Evangelical Lutheran hymnals); (4) usage of biblical characters and motives in other texts (such as individual prayers, religious poetry, etc.).

The presence of biblical quotations and allusions in the epitaphs provides a certain repertoire of gravestone texts. However, besides the manifestations of the religious identity, the material of the Latvian memorial inscriptions shows that there are other approaches in creating epitaph texts, such as quoting Latvian folksongs, mourning lyrics, popular songs, etc.

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The results of the analysis can be applied in comparative epitaph studies as a Latvian example. The issues discussed in the article may be useful in cultural and folk religion studies, too.

**Keywords:**

Latvian cemeteries, epitaphs, biblical quotations, religious poetry, intertextuality

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