Journeys Where Time Is Abolished
Jean-Claude Latombe
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Often considered sad places, cemeteries and graves are also sources of reflection and inspiration for the living. They may even be comforting and informative sights.

Ranging from the basic, like the stone tumuli of the Sahara, to the opulent, like the magnificent mausoleums of Delhi, burials often tell us a lot about the lifestyles and aspirations of our predecessors. Most of them lived simply and seemed to accept their fate, perhaps because they didn't really have a choice. Fewer, usually the wealthiest and most powerful, aspired to some form of eternity by erecting imposing tombs to assert their worthiness and remind future generations of their past existence. Either way, visiting and observing their resting places can bring clarity of mind, by helping us to accept the impermanence of life and reflect on how we wish to spend the rest of our lives. Burial sites do not just exist to house the dead; they also nurture the living!

In this book I show photos of burial sites that I visited in various countries around the world. Some are famous, others rarely seen. Despite being extremely diverse in appearance, they all convey the same timeless atmosphere. Each of my visits felt like a journey into a different world, where time is abolished.

Jean-Claude Latombe
Stanford, October 2022

[The years the photos were taken are indicated between square brackets in the titles of the book sections or, occasionally, in the captions of the photos.]


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Back cover: [2021] Tombs in the cemetery of Zipolite, a coastal village in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. See page 207.
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Built at the top of a mountain of the same name, Koyasan is a thriving center of Japanese Buddhism with over one hundred monasteries and temples. It is also the headquarter of Shingon Buddhism.

It was founded in 816 by a Buddhist priest named Kukai and known posthumously as Kobo Daishi, who is also the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism. For centuries, Koyasan has attracted pilgrims from all parts of Japan.

On the eastern side of Koyasan, Okunoin is the largest Buddhist cemetery in Japan, with over 200,000 tombstones. At its northern end stands the closed mausoleum that contains...

...the remains of Kobo Daishi. However, his followers believe he is still alive, meditating in the mausoleum and waiting for the arrival of Maitreya, a future Buddha. So, many Japanese Buddhists wish to have their ashes, or at least a tuft of hair, buried in Okunoin, hoping that Kobo-Daishi will ease the transition of their souls into the world of the afterlife.

The cemetery stretches on both sides of a two-kilometer-long alley lined with lanterns and tombstones, through a mossy forest of tall cedars. Due to the ambient humidity, the moss-covered tombstones eventually blend into their surroundings. The general atmosphere is not one of sadness, but one of great serenity.

The most common shape of tombstone in Okunoin is the gorinto (see photo on the right), a five-layer pagoda. These layers symbolize the Five Elements in Japanese Buddhism. From base to top, they are: earth (the layer shaped as a cube), water (sphere), fire (pyramid), air (sort of hemisphere), and void (jewel shape). The gorinto shape of a tombstone expresses the belief that the physical body of a deceased returns to its elemental form.

Right: Gorinto-shaped tombstone of Lady Sugen. Measuring 6.6m in height, this is the largest gorinto in Okunoin. It was erected in 1627 for the repose of Lady Sugen (her posthumous Buddhist name), the main wife of the second Tokugawa shogun, Hidetada (see page 14). Lady Sugen was also the mother of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, and the maternal grandmother of the Empress Meisho. Born in 1573, she died in 1626 at the age of 54.

Next double page: Alignment of gorintos in Okunoin.
This page and opposite page:
Parcels in Okunoin, some accessed via stone torii gates. Most tombstones are shaped as gorinto.
This page, opposite page, and following two pages:
Statues adorning tombs and burial plots in Okunoin.
Below: Memorial made of rows of statues representing children lost to miscarriages. The statue at the top is jizo, a popular bodhisattva who helps these children's souls to reach safely the world of the afterlife.
Statue representing a monk or a pilgrim.
Statue of Kannon, the Japanese goddess of compassion.
Tokugawa mausoleum, Koyasan, Kii peninsula, Japan [2016]

This family mausoleum was built in 1643 in Koyasan at the request of the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651), the third of the family, to honor his grandfather Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) and his father Tokugawa Hidetada (1579-1632). Tokugawa Ieyasu was the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate that ruled Japan during the Edo period (1603-1868).

The mausoleum consists of two identical 6x6-meters square-shaped buildings, sumptuously decorated with carved wood sculptures, brass fittings, and Chinese-style gables. Its construction took 20 years to complete.
Resting places of the Mori Lords, Hagi, Japan [2019]

Located on the San-in coast (north coast of western Honshu), Hagi is the former fief of the Mori family. Throughout the Edo period (1603-1868), fourteen successive Mori lords ruled the Choshu domain, which approximately covered today’s Yamaguchi prefecture.

The Choshu domain was founded by Mori Terumoto (1553-1625), the grandson of the great warlord Mori Motonari. In the late 1500s, Terumoto, a powerful daimyo controlling a large domain centered on Hiroshima, was appointed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, then the actual ruler of Japan, to the important Council of the Five Great Elders, along with Tokugawa Ieyasu (see page 14).

At Hideyoshi’s death in 1598, Ieyasu had the ambition to become Hideyoshi’s successor. Terumoto made the mistake to side against him. After Ieyasu’s victory to side against him. After Ieyasu’s victory, Terumoto, who did not participate in the battle, saw his domain greatly reduced. He retreated to Hagi and made it the capital of its new domain, the Choshu domain.

Terumoto was a good administrator and managed his reduced domain well. He patronized the development of the Hagi ware, a type of ceramic pottery considered one of the best in Japan, which contributed to the wealth of the domain. In the late Edo era, Hagi played an important role as one of the birthplaces of modern Japan, by experimenting with technologies imported from Western nations. It also contributed to the development of revolutionary ideas that eventually led to the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, some 260 years after Terumoto’s domain was reduced.

The burial places of the Mori lords are spread over four cemeteries:

- Terumoto Mori is buried separately in a small cemetery located in Hagi’s former samurai district, near the castle he had built in the early 1600s.

- The next eleven lords are buried in two impressive cemeteries located in distinct Zen Buddhist temples in Hagi, Daishoin and Tokoji. The Mori family had then adopted a Chinese system of burial that alternates grave locations between successive generations. So, the 2nd, 4th, 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th lords are buried in Daishoin, while the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th lords are buried in Tokoji. (It is also said that the Mori family chose to bury their dead in two separate temples to hide their power from the shogunate.)

- The last two lords are entombed in a more recent burial site in Yamaguchi City (not shown in the following pages).

The two cemeteries in Daishoin and Tokoji are similar, like twin cemeteries. They both offer a grandiose sight. Each is adorned with over 500 stone lanterns lined into parallel rows on a gentle slope, looking like an army of soldiers protecting their lords. The holes in the lanterns are either full circles or half-circles, representing the sun and the moon, respectively. The lords are buried with their wives at the upper end of the slope. The two cemeteries also include graves of samurai who committed seppuku after the death of their lords.
Bronze statue of Mori Terumoto, close to the Hagi castle.

Tenjuin cemetery, where Mori Terumoto and his wife are buried. This cemetery is also the resting place of Motofusa Nagai, a samurai who committed seppuku after Terumoto’s death.
Entrance of the cemetery in Daishoin.

Burial site of a samurai on the left side of the cemetery.
Rows of stone lanterns in the Daishoin cemetery. The graves of the Mori lords are uphill above the torii gates.
Some of the tombstones of the lords and their wives in the Daishoin cemetery. They form a row perpendicular to the slope of the cemetery, facing the lanterns. They are all shaped as gorinto.

Pair of tombstones of a Mori lord and his wife.
Gorinto marking one of the Mori tombstones.
Entrance of the cemetery in Tokoji.

View of the Tokoji cemetery from the entrance.
Here, too, the tombs of the Mori lords are located uphill behind the torii gates.

Opposite page: Lanterns in the Tokoji cemetery.
As in Daishoin, the graves of the Mori lords and their wives overlook the lanterns, but they are marked with flat stone stelae. A line of tortoise statues (opposite page) separates them from the lanterns.

(In Japanese Buddhism, the tortoise is a symbol of longevity and is believed to be a haven for immortals.)
View over the field of lanterns and the torii gates from the upper part of the Tokoji cemetery.
Tsuwano is a small castle town surrounded by high hills, some 20km from the north coast of southern Honshu. It is home of Yomeiji, a Zen Buddhist temple founded in 1420 as the family temple of the Tsuwano lords. The last family to rule the Tsuwano domain was the Kamei clan (1618-1871).

The cemetery of Yomeiji is not very impressive, but it is serene and its mossy tombstones blend well with the thatched roofs of the old temple. It is also known as the resting place of Ogai Mori (1862-1922), a famous novelist and poet born in Tsuwano, who was also Surgeon General of the Imperial Japanese Army.
Matsue, the largest city on the San-in coast (north coast of western Honshu), is the former fief of the Matsudaira family. Throughout most of the Edo period, ten successive Matsudaira lords ruled the Matsue domain.

The first Matsudaira lord of the Matsue domain was Matsudaira Naomasa (1601-1666), a grandson of Tokugawa Ieyasu (the first Tokugawa Shogun, see page 14). After helping his grandfather at the siege of Osaka (1614), he became a daimyo and then the lord of successive domains, including the Matsumoto domain. Finally, in 1638 he was given the Matsue domain. His nine successors ruled this domain until the Meiji restoration.

Gesshoji is a Zen Buddhist temple, originally called Tounji. It got its new name when Naomasa buried his mother, named Gessho (meaning “lit up by moonlight”), on the temple’s grounds. Gesshoji then served as the Matsudaira family temple and its cemetery became the resting place of the first nine Matsudaira lords of Matsue and their family. The 10th (and last) lord, who moved to Edo (now Tokyo) after the Meiji restoration, is buried in Tokyo.

Each of the nine lords has a distinct parcel in the cemetery. Most of these parcels are delineated by rows of lanterns and fronted by a Karamon-style gate with intricately carved doors. The one of Matsudaira Naomasa (photo below) is the largest and the only one surrounded by a moat. It is accessed via a bridge over the moat.
Moat surrounding the parcel of Matsudaira Naomasa.

Karamon-style gate to the parcel of Matsudaira Tsunachika, the third lord of Matsue, who ruled in 1675–1704.
Left: Carved wooden door at the entrance of the Matsudaira Tsunachika's parcel in the Gesshoji cemetery.

Opposite page:
Wood carving of a Nio on one half of the entrance door of the parcel of Matsudaira Munenobu, the sixth lord of Matsue, who ruled in 1731-1767.

The Nio are twin guardians, one with his mouth open (symbol of birth), the other with his mouth closed (symbol of death). The one with the closed mouth (not shown) is carved on the other half of the entrance door.

Giant stone tortoise with a stela on its back, called Juzohi-no-Okame (meaning “Longevity Monument of the Giant Turtle”), located in the parcel of Matsudaira Munenobu.
Slate coffins of the prehistoric site of Peinan, Taitung, Taiwan [2016]

The prehistoric settlement of Peinan was discovered in the late 1890s by Japanese anthropologist Ryuzo Torii, at the start of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan. However, there was no major excavation of the site until 1980. Then, during the construction of the new Taitung railway station, several thousand rectangular slate coffins, as well as many stone farming tools, jade objects, and pottery fragments, were unearthed. Carbon-14 dating indicates that the site reached its peak around 3000 years ago.

The coffins were found oriented towards nearby Mount Dulan, perhaps for religious reasons. Many still contained human remains, as well as jade and stone objects. The study of these remains and tools has shown that every individual, regardless of gender and social status, had the lateral incisors and canines of the upper jaw removed in adolescence, probably as a rite of entry into adulthood.

Opposite page: A few slate coffins left in-situ in the Peinan archaeological site.
The Torajas are an ethnic group indigenous to the highlands of south-central Sulawesi. Most live in a region called Tana Toraja, around the small towns of Mamasa, Rantepao, and Makale. They are mainly known to outsiders for their intricate and colorful funeral ceremonies.

A Toraja funeral ceremony starts when an amount of resources appropriate to the status of the deceased has been gathered. It may then last for several days, in the presence of the family and the entire community. It consists of a series of rituals performed to help the deceased transition to the “Puya” (the afterlife).

For several days, large numbers of water buffaloes, pigs, and chickens are slaughtered below the coffin, which had been placed on a balcony of the family’s tongkonan (traditional house). Many were offered by the community in a form of repayment of a societal debt owed to the deceased. The coffin is ultimately carried to the burial site, with more rituals performed along the way. There, it is placed in a family tomb, often carved into a rock cliff or a huge boulder.

Some burial sites, such as Londa and Lemo, are adorned with effigies (wood or bamboo statues) of the deceased, called tau tau.

[1972] Left to right, top down: (1) The coffin sits on the balcony of the family’s tongkonan. (2 and 3) Buffalos are slaughtered below the coffin. (4) The coffin is taken down. (5) More rituals are performed. (6) The coffin is carried to the burial site. (Continued on next page.)
(Continued from previous page) From left to right: (7) Other rituals are performed on the way to the burial site. (8) The procession reaches the burial site. (9) The coffin is placed in a tomb carved into a boulder.

[2009] Burial site made of several tombs carved into a vertical cliff.
Another view of the burial site of Lemo, (Photo taken 38 years before the one in the opposite page.)

Coffins stacked among rocks in the burial cave of Londa.

Opposite page: Burial site of Lemo, with its many tau tau.
[1972] Other views of the Londa cave, with tau tau sheltered in a kind of balcony.
[2009] Photos of the Londa cave, taken 38 years after those in the opposite page.
[2009] Close-ups on some of the tau tau in the Londa site.
[2009] Tombs hewn into a large boulder.
(Note the mix of Toraja traditions and Christian symbols in the photo above.)
New Delhi is home to several magnificent mausoleums (pages 46-57) built when most of India was ruled by Islamic dynasties, first the Delhi Sultanate in 1206-1526, then the Mughal Empire in 1526-1720. After 1720, the Mughal Empire became increasingly fragmented and weaker, losing territories, until it was formally dissolved by the British Raj in 1858.

The Lodi Gardens, a park named after the Afghan Lodi dynasty that ruled the Delhi Sultanate between 1451 and 1526, contains the following tombs (shown on this page and the opposite one) built during the Delhi Sultanate:

- The tomb of Muhammad Shah Sayyid, the third sultan (1434-1443) of the Sayyid dynasty, which ruled the Delhi Sultanate between 1414 and 1451, prior to the Lodi dynasty. It was built in 1444 by Alam Shah, the fourth and last sultan of the Sayyid dynasty. It presents a classical architecture made of an octagonal chamber surrounded by an outer arcade and surmounted by a central dome, itself bordered by eight “chhatris” (small domed pavilions). Each exterior face of the arcade is 10m wide.

- The tomb of Sikandar Lodi, a sultan of the Lodi dynasty between 1489 and 1517 and a poet in Farsi. The tomb was built in 1517 by his son Ibrahim Lodi. Like the tomb of Muhammad Shah Sayyid it has an octagonal shape.

- The tomb called Shisha Gumbad (meaning “mirror dome”). It is a tomb of the Lodi dynasty, probably constructed between 1489 and 1517. It contains several graves, but their occupants have not been identified.
Tomb of Sikandar Lodi.

Shisha Qumbad.
Tomb of Humayun, New Delhi, India [2018]

Humayun, was the second emperor of the Mughal Empire. He reigned between 1530 and 1540 and again in 1555-1556. In 1540, he lost territories to Sher Sha Suri, who founded the Suri Empire that ruled the northern part of the Indian subcontinent (including Delhi) for 15 years. In 1555, Humayun regained his lost territories, and conquered some more. At his death the Mughal empire covered present-day northern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh.

The tomb of Humayun in New Delhi is a magnificent mausoleum built between 1565 and 1572. It is said to have inspired the Taj Mahal, which it predates by 60 years.

Commissioned by the emperor’s first wife, Persian-born Bega Begum, it was designed by two Persian architects, Mirak Mirza Ghiyas and his son Sayyid Muhammad. Its style mixes Persian, Central Asian, and Indian influences. The perfect geometrical facade is made of white marble and red sandstone. The building reaches 47 meters in height. It contains other tombs, including the one of Empress Bega Begum.

The location of Humayun’s tomb was chosen to be close to the Nizamuddin Dargah (see page 57), the mausoleum dedicated to Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya, a Sufi saint revered by the Mughal ruler.

Mausoleum of Humayun seen from the main entrance of the surrounding gardens.

Opposite page: Cenotaph of Humayun in the chamber under the white dome of the mausoleum. His actual remains are located below, in the basement.
Other views highlighting the perfect geometry of the Humayun mausoleum. The photo below shows the upper part of the building, which contains Humayun's cenotaph.
Tomb of Isa Khan Niazi, New Delhi, India [2018]

Isa Khan Niazi (1453-1548) was an Afghan noble in the court of Sher Shah Suri, the ruler who fought Humayun and founded the Suri Empire in northern India (see page 48).

His tomb, located a short distance from Humayun’s tomb, was constructed in 1547-1548 during his lifetime, hence about 20 years before Humayun’s. It is a beautiful example of Lodi-style architecture.

View of the mausoleum of Isa Khan Niazi. The blue tiles on the roofs of the eight chhatris surrounding the main dome were restored in 2014.
Cenotaphs in the inner chamber of the Isa Khan Niazi’s mausoleum. Six of the eight walls have recessed “jalis” (stone latticed screens) that bring dim daylight into the chamber.

Tomb of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, New Delhi, India [2019]

Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq was the founder of the Tughlaq dynasty that ruled over the Delhi Sultanate between 1320 and 1413. He died in 1325 after a short reign of five years. His tomb may have been built during his lifetime, but it is also possible that it was completed by his son and successor Muhammad bin Tughluq.

The tomb complex with its surrounding wall looks like a fortress. Constructed on an artificial lake (now dry) it is accessible by a causeway. The main structure is a pentagonal building made of red sandstone and covered by a white-marble dome resting on an octagonal platform. Each of its five sloping walls makes a 75-degree angle with the ground. The building contains the graves of Ghiyasuddin, his son Muhammad, and his wife Makhdima Jehan.

A smaller domed building stands outside the main pentagonal building. It is the tomb of Zafar Khan, a general who conquered vast territories for the Delhi Sultanate and died in 1299 in the battle of Kili against the Mongols. It was built by Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq.
The stone causeway leading to the entrance of the Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq’s tomb complex.

The main pentagonal building in the Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq’s tomb complex, and the smaller tomb of Zafar Khan on the right.
The three graves in the pentagonal building.

The grave of Zafar Khan in the smaller domed building.
Mausoleum of Safdarjung, New Delhi, India [2019]

Abul Mansur Khan, better known as Safdarjung, was the nawab (governor) of Awadh, a region covering roughly the present-day Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, under the Mughal Empire. From 1748 to 1753 he served as Vazir (prime minister) of the declining Mughal empire. After trying to usurp all powers, Safdarjung was driven out of Delhi in 1753 and died in 1754. With the emperor’s permission, his son built this grandiose mausoleum.

The Safdarjung mausoleum is one of the last examples of Mughal architecture. Inspired by Humayun’s mausoleum, its façade is finished in red sandstone with white marble inlays. The building is dominated by a large white dome.
Another view of Safdarjung’s mausoleum.

Cenotaph of Safdarjung in the mausoleum.
This dargah (mausoleum) is dedicated to Sufi saint Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325) who preached a doctrine of tolerance. It stands in a maze of narrow alleys and corridors, where vendors sell religious offerings, such as rose petals, incense, perfume, and chadar (holy cloth).

On each day the dargah is visited by many pilgrims, who spend hours reading and chanting. It is always open, so that pilgrims may spend the night to continue praying, and even sleep. Some medical care is also provided to those in need.

The main building, Nizamuddin’s tomb, was built in 1325 by Muhammad bin Tughlaq (see page 52). It is dominated by a white dome measuring about 6 meters in diameter.
Tomb of Zain-ul-Abidin's mother,
Srinagar, Kashmir, India [2022]

Zain-ul-Abidin (1395-1470), the 8th sultan of Kashmir, reigned for 50 years during which he was known for his liberal religious policies and his interest in art and architecture. He built the five-dome brick structure shown in the photo below to be his mother's tomb.

This large tomb, which strangely resembles an old Byzantine church, is unlike any other building in Srinagar. Gandara-style stone carvings present at the base of the structure and around it suggest it may have been built at the site of an earlier Buddhist temple.

The tomb's chamber (opposite page) contains a single burial, that of Zain-ul-Abidin's mother.

Other graves, old and new, surround the domed tomb. In particular, a small enclosed cemetery is believed to contain the tombs of Zain-ul-Abidin and his wives.

An especially interesting figure, Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat (1499-1551), is also buried near the domed tomb. Born in a family of Kashgaria's rulers, Haidar was a maternal cousin of Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, and served as an advisor of Humayun, the second Mughal emperor. He is remembered as a renowned historian, poet, general, and statesman. He is the author of the famous Tarikh-i-Rashidi, a history of Central Asia. In 1540 he conquered Kashmir and became its ruler until his death in 1551.
**Mausoleum of Afaq Khoja, Kashgar, Xinjiang [2000]**

Afaq Khoja (1626-1694) was religious and political leader in Kashgaria. His mausoleum, located 5 kilometers from Kashgar's center, was built around 1640 as the tomb of his father, Muhammad Yusuf, a Sufi master. Afaq Khoja was buried there later, in 1694. But as he was more famous than his father, his name was given to the mausoleum, which also hosts the tombs of five generations of Afaq family members.

The mausoleum has a square shape marked by tiled towers at its angles. The dome measures 17 meters in diameter and is surmounted by a lantern 24 meters above ground.

**Kyrgyz cemetery, Muztag Ata, Xinjiang [2000]**

Xinjiang is home to several ethnic groups. The largest consists of the Uyghurs. In comparison the Kyrgyz form a very small group.

In southwestern Xinjiang, at the base of Mount Muztagh Ata (7546m), there is a Kyrgyz village, Subah. Its inhabitants are mostly semi-nomadic herders, but at certain times of the year (the “climbing seasons” of Muztagh Ata) they help climbers to transport tents, gear, and food to the base camp of the mountain on the backs of their camels.

A short distance from their village, a quiet cemetery is made of stone and mud bricks (see opposite page). No one rich or famous seems to have been buried here!
Cemetery of the village of Subah, with Muztagh Ata in the background.

A closer view of the cemetery of Subah.
Cemeteries in southern Kyrgyzstan [2008 and 2011]

Southern Kyrgyzstan consists mainly of two elongated mountain ranges, the Turkestan range along the border with Tajikistan and the Tien-Shan range along the border with Xinjiang. These mountainous areas are dotted with small and unassuming cemeteries. Although the main religion of the population is Islam, many of these resting places have signs than derive from pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions.

[2008] Isolated graveyard southeast of the town of Naryn, with the western end of the Tien-Shan range in the background.

Above and opposite page: Signs (mostly sheep and goat horns) marking the entrance of cemeteries in the Turkestan mountain range.
Gur-e Amir, Samarkand, Uzbekistan [2004 and 2012]

Gur-e Amir, which translates to “Tomb of the King”, is the mausoleum that contains the tomb of the great Turco-Mongol conqueror Amir Timur (1336-1405), also known as Tamerlane. Its architecture was a precursor for later Mughal tombs, such as the Humayun tomb in Delhi (see pages 48-50). The mausoleum also contains the remains of Timur’s sons Shah Rukh and Miran Shah, his grandsons Ulugh Beg, Pir Muhammad, and Muhammad Sultan, and his spiritual mentor Mir Said Baraka.

The construction of the mausoleum began in 1403 under the reign of Timur after the death of his grandson and heir presumptive Muhammad Sultan, who died in a battle at the age of 29. After the death of Timur in 1405 the work was completed by his successor Ulugh Beg, another of his grandsons. The main building in the complex has an octagonal perimeter and is dominated by a blue fluted dome. The dome measures 15 meters in diameter and 12.5 meters in height. The interior forms a large square chamber whose walls are decorated with marble carvings and painted and gilded plaster.

Starting at the end of the 17th century, Samarkand suffered a long period of decline, and its historical monuments were forgotten. It was not until the 1950s, under the Soviet Union, that Gur e-Amir was partially restored. Later, the Republic of Uzbekistan, which was founded in 1991 and regards Timur as its greatest hero, performed more extensive renovations.


[2012] Inner square chamber of Gur-e Amir, with the cenotaphs of the members of the Timur family (buried below in a cruciform crypt).
Shah-i Zinda necropolis, Samarkand, Uzbekistan [2004 and 2012]

This necropolis is located on the southern slope of the Afrasiyab hill. The name Shah-i Zinda, which means “Living King”, refers to a legend that a cousin of the prophet Muhammad is buried at the top of the hill, where he still resides in an underground palace. Over time, mausoleums were built downward.

The necropolis consists of about 40 structures erected on both sides of a 200-meter-long alley stretching over three levels on the slope of the hill. Most of the structures are mausoleums built in the 14th-15th centuries for female members of the Timurid family. In 1434 Ulugh Beg (see page 64) added a monumental gate at the lower end of the alley.

[2004] Beginning of the alley seen from the entrance gate of the necropolis built by Ulugh Beg.

[2004] Lowest section of the Shah-i Zinda necropolis, with some crumbling walls before its most recent restoration.
Uzbek women in a covered passage over the necropolis alley.

Another covered passage over the alley, with old cenotaphs sitting in the foreground.


Opposite page:


The Ismail Somoni mausoleum (see opposite page).
Mausoleums of Ismail Somoni and Chashma-Ayub, Bukhara, Uzbekistan [2012]

The Ismail Somoni mausoleum (see the photo at the bottom of the opposite page) was built by Ismail Somoni (849-907), who united the Samanid state. Its crypt contains three graves, but only a grandson of Ismail is identified by a plaque. It is possible that one of the graves contains the remains of Ismail.

A legend says that Prophet Ayub (Job) struck the ground with his walking staff at the location of the Chashma-Ayub mausoleum, creating a “chashma” (well), the water of which had healing powers. A chamber in the mausoleum contains a well assumed to be the one of the legend. A terracotta inscription gives a construction date of 1379-1380.
This necropolis is reminiscent of the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis in Samarkand (see page 67), but it is smaller and less colorful. It was formed between the 11th and 17th century, initially for the tombs of the Sayyid dynasty of Termez, who claimed to be descendants of the prophet Muhammad. The earliest tomb was built for Sayyid Hassan al-Amir, the founder of this dynasty. The present-day complex consists of several mausoleums surrounding a rectangular plaza. These mausoleums would once have been colorfully tiled, but the 2002 renovation left the baked brick walls without tiles, except for the structure at the western end of the plaza, a vaulted mirhab with a large iwan that connects the two oldest chambers of the necropolis.

Above and opposite page: Domed ceiling and tombs in the chamber (11th century) on the right side of the blue-tiled iwan.

View of the necropolis from the east, with the blue-tiled iwan at the western end of the rectangular plaza.
This mausoleum is located next to the ancient citadel of Old Termez. Hakim al Termezi, the “Wise Man of Termez”, was a 9th-century Sufi saint and scholar. He founded a new dervish order in Termez and died there in 859. He was buried in the yard of a hanaka (a Sufi dwelling place). Later, successive mausoleum structures were built for him. The current baked-brick mausoleum was erected at the instigation of Timur’s son Shah Rukh (1377-1447), but has since undergone extensive restorations. The 15th-century marble cenotaph placed above the grave of the saint man is considered a masterpiece of stone carving.
Fifteenth-century marble cenotaph above the grave of Hakim al Termezi.

One of the beautifully decorated domed ceilings in the mausoleum.
Located 17 kilometers northwest of the city of Karshi, near the small town of Kasan, this mausoleum hosts the tomb of Hazrati Khasim Ata, an 11th-century Islamic missionary. The complex also contains a mosque, as well as other tombs of lesser-known holy men. These tombs are spread in smaller buildings and outside in the surrounding gardens.

A few faithful come every day to pray on the tombs of the holy men. This little-known site is particularly peaceful and retains a genuine spiritual character.
Ancient cenotaphs lined up on a platform in the Sultan Mir Khaydar mausoleum complex. (See next page.)

Resting place of Hazrati Khasim Ata in the main building of the mausoleum, with his pilgrim staff against the wall.
Located 38 kilometers west of the city Karshi, near the village of Kasbi, this other little-known mausoleum complex consists of several brick buildings housing tombs, some dating from as early as the 11th and 12th centuries, a 17th-century mosque, and an old sardoba (dome-covered water reservoir). It features a collection of ancient cenotaphs (see the photo at the bottom of the previous page) that have been moved from their original locations to an outdoor platform. Recently renovated, this site is regularly visited by pilgrims.

The main building housing tombs, the only one with a tiled dome.
Another domed building housing tombs, with a separate grave outside.

The 11th-century mosque in the mausoleum complex.
Mizdarkhan cemetery, Karakalpakstan, western Uzbekistan [2018]

Mizdakan was a large city founded in the 4th century BCE. But in the 14th century it was destroyed by Timur and never recovered. Local people still considered the site sacred and returned to bury their dead and build mausoleums.

Some of these mausoleums have survived to this day, often in a state of disrepair. So, today, most of the tombs are more recent. The cemetery is huge, peaceful, and slightly eerie. It is located 15 kilometers west of Nukus, the province capital of Karakalpakstan.

One mysterious mausoleum is the one of Shamun Nabi, a man who, according to a legend, was born in Arabia before the prophet Muhammad. The sarcophagus in this mausoleum measures 25 meters in length, because people believed that the body of Shamun Nabi would continue to grow after his death. But the sarcophagus was opened in 1966 and turned out empty.

The numerous stacks of 7 stones that dot the cemetery, especially near ancient tombs, form another intriguing sight. They are made by visitors believing that by erecting such stacks their wishes will be granted.

Below, opposite page, and following double page: Views over parts of the cemetery.
Mausoleums in the Mizdarkan cemetery.

Stacks of 7 stones next to ancient mausoleums.
Freshly restored mausoleum of Shamun Nabi.

Interior of the restored mausoleum of Mazlum Khan Slu, a local ruler, dating back to the 14th century.
Old graveyards on the Ustyurt plateau, western Uzbekistan [2018]

At an average altitude of 150m the forbidding, windswept Ustyurt plateau stretches 800 kilometers from north to south, between the Caspian Sea on the west and the Aral Sea and the final portion of the Amu Darya drainage basin on the east. It is sparsely populated, mostly by semi-nomads who raise sheep, goats, and camels. These three pages show remains of abandoned Kazakh and Russian graveyards on the plateau, near the Aral Sea.
More gravestones in the Kazakh cemetery, with symbols identifying different families or clans.
Moshtaq Ali Shah was a Sufi mystic living in Kerman in the late 12th century and early 13th century. The growing number of his followers led his opponents to start the rumor that he played music on a setar (a string Persian instrument) while reading the Quran, hence lacking respect for the holy book. On the order of the head mollah of Kerman, he was stoned to death in 1206. The building had been originally built as the burial site of a governor of Kerman. But the governor's son, who was a follower of the Sufi mystic, decided to bury Moshtaq Ali Shah next to his father. The mausoleum has since been a pilgrimage site.
Shah Ne’emat Ollah-e-vali mausoleum, Mahan, southeastern Iran [2014]

Shah Ne’emat Ollah-e-vali (1330-1431) was a well-known Sufi leader and poet. Born in Aleppo, he moved to Mahan in 1404, some 30 kilometers southwest of the city of Kerman, where he established a new dervish order. Erected in 1436 the mausoleum in his honor became a popular pilgrimage site. New structures and courtyards were added later to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims. The sanctuary chamber that contains the saint man’s tomb is surmounted by a large blue dome.
Shrine of Hilal ibn Ali, Aran, central Iran [2014]

This shrine houses the tomb of Hilal ibn Ali, a son of Ali, himself son-in-law, cousin, and companion of the prophet Muhammad. In Shia Islam, Ali is considered the legitimate successor of Muhammad and is the first Imam.

Next to the shrine, a cemetery is dedicated to martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988).
This page and the next three show pictures of ancient tombs in eastern Turkey, for which little reliable information is available:

- This page: Seljuk cemetery with tombstones dating from the 14th to the 17th centuries, in Gevas, on the southern shore of the lake of Van.

- Opposite page: Tomb with a conical roof built in 1358 by Seljuk ruler Melik Izeddin for his daughter Halime Hatun, in the Seljuk cemetery of Gevas.

- Pages 96 and 97: Two of the three monumental tombs collectively called Üç Kümbetler (meaning "three cupolas") in Erzurum. The largest and most unusual one (on page 98) is believed to date from the end of the 12th century and to belong to Emir Saltuk, the founder of a dynasty that ruled a beylic (small kingdom) around Erzurum between 1071 and 1202. However, this belief is only based on a local legend and the tomb's style affinity with other 12th-century Saltukid structures in Erzurum. The occupants of the two other tombs are unknown.
Mevlana Museum, Konya, Turkey [2017]

Konya is famous as the city where Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi (1207-1273), better known as Mevlana (“Our Master”) or Rumi, founded the whirling dervish sect. Born in Balkh in present-day northern Afghanistan, Mevlana is regarded as one of the greatest Persian poets and Sufi mystics.

The former lodge of the whirling dervishes, now converted into a museum, is the resting place of Mevlana and other eminent dervishes. It is a holy place that attracts Muslim pilgrims from various parts of the world.

Opposite page: The former lodge of the whirling dervishes, capped with a fluted conical dome covered with turquoise faience. Mevlana’s sarcophagus lies below this dome.

Graves of dervishes in the courtyard of the Mevlana Museum.

Mevlana’s sarcophagus embroidered with verses of the Quran and topped with his turban, in the former lodge. (The other, barely visible, turban is that of his father. The remains of the two men lie in a chamber located below.)
Sarcophagi of other eminent dervishes in the Mevlana Museum.

Graveyard in Kilis, south-central Turkey [2009]
Rock-hewn tombs of Medain Saleh, Saudi Arabia [2008]

Medain Saleh, also known as Hegra (its historic Greek name), is the site of more than 100 monumental tombs carved into sandstone and spread over an area of several square kilometers. It is located roughly 400 kilometers north of Medina and over 300 kilometers south of Petra in Jordan. The extensive settlement of the site happened under the Nabatean king Aretas IV Philopatris (9BCE-40CE), who made Hegra into his second capital, after Petra. At the crossroad of several caravan routes, the city flourished on trade. However, in 104CE the Nabatean kingdom was annexed by the Roman Empire. The ensuing shift in trade to maritime routes and the increasing desertification of the region led to the rapid decline of Hegra. Today, the rock-hewn tombs are most of what remains of Hegra. Surrounded by natural sandstone formations with extravagant shapes, they form a most impressive sight. Their facades present ornamental elements mixing Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman influences.
Tomb clusters called Qasr Al-Ahma (top) and Al Khuraymat (above).

Side view of the tomb cluster Qasr Al-Ahma.
Tomb in the cluster Al Khuraymat.

A smaller tomb.
Isolated tomb called Qasr Al Farid.
Recesses carved into the interior walls of a tomb, where the corpses of the deceased were laid down.
First settled in the 13th century, Old Harar (also known as Jugal) became a notable city in 1520 as the capital of the Adal Sultanate, a Muslim Somali kingdom. It flourished as a trade center for people from the Horn of Africa, the Arabic Peninsula, and South Asia. Today the city is a maze of small streets and alleys enclosed by a 3.4km-long defensive wall built in the mid-16th century by Emir Nur ibn Mujahid. It is the main center of Ethiopia’s Muslim population, and it is said to have the largest density of mosques in any city of the world.

Various old tombs are scattered around Old Harar. Most are very modest. They usually belong to former rulers or religious men, of whom what is known is often based on legends and sometimes controversial.

These four pages show photos of various tombs, including those of:

- Jeberti Ismail, a Somali man who came to Harar to study the Quran.
- Sheikh Ali Hassan.
- Emir Nur ibn Mujahid, the builder of the defensive wall around the city.
- Sheikh Ahmed Ansar.
- Sheikh Abadir, considered the founder of Harar. His tomb is part of an ensemble that also includes a small cemetery for his family and an old traditional house where some of his descendants still live.

Opposite page:
[2017] Tomb of Sheikh Ahmed Ansar, on which a sycamore tree has grown.


[2017] House of descendants of Sheikh Abadir, adjacent to his tomb.
[2017] In the cemetery of the Sheikh Abadir’s tomb ensemble.
Sheikh Hussein was a 13th-century holy man who contributed to the introduction of Islam to the region where his sanctuary now stands, in a small village named after him, about 150 kilometers southwest of Harar.

The sanctuary houses the grave of the holy man. For centuries, it has been the destination of a major pilgrimage that occurs twice a year, to commemorate his birth and his death, bringing several thousands pilgrims each time.

The sanctuary ensemble consists of several structures built from local sandstone, limestone, and wood, and whitewashed once a year. It includes other notable graves and is surrounded by a large cemetery.

Entrance of the inner structure that forms the core of the sanctuary. Sheikh Hussein and several members of his family are buried here.
Building housing the grave of Sheikh Hussein.

Shrine honoring a saint man from Baghdad who visited the sanctuary.
Gravestones in the cemetery surrounding the Sheikh Hussein sanctuary.
Lonely graves in the Bale mountains [2013]...

...and the Danakil (Afar) depression [1973], Ethiopia
The Beata Maryam church is the resting place of Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913), who ruled Ethiopia between 1889 and 1913, his wife Taytu Betul, and his daughter Empress Zewditu, the only female head of the Ethiopian Empire (between 1916 and 1930). Their tombs are located in a crypt below the church.

The Holy Trinity cathedral (see page 120) is home of the tombs of Emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975), who reigned between 1930 and 1974, and his wife Menen Asfaw. Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974 by a group of military officers known as the Derg and murdered in August 1975. After the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, his remains were found under a concrete slab in the imperial palace and temporarily moved next to his great-uncle Menelik II. In November 2000, 25 years after his death, Haile Selassie was reburied in the Holy Trinity cathedral during a ceremony attended by Rastafarians from various parts of the world.
Tewodros II (1818-1868) was emperor of Ethiopia from 1855 until his suicide in 1868. A series of diplomatic misunderstandings led him to imprison the British consul and other British subjects. In response, the British government sent an army led by Robert Napier. Tewodros was defeated at Magdala, where he committed suicide on April 13, 1868.

He is buried on one of the two ambas (flat-top mountains) forming the site of Magdala.
Amba on top of which Tewodros II is buried.

Marker of the modest grave of Tewodros II and his portrait behind the grave.
A Jewish cemetery in the Amhara region, Ethiopia [2012]

For centuries, the Amhara and Tigray regions of Ethiopia have been home to an important Jewish community, known as Beta Israel. This community was spread among hundreds of villages.

Most of this community immigrated to Israel between 1984 and 1991. Today, few of its members still live in Ethiopia.

Graveyard with old stelae, Yeha, Tigray, Ethiopia [2015]

Over 2500 years ago, the village of Yeha was a center of the Sabaean culture and the capital of the Damot kingdom. Today the most visible remains from that period are the stone walls of a temple built in the 7th century BCE. The current village graveyard is dotted with a few thin stelae, which appear to be much older than the graves. They were probably brought here by the villagers from another location, to mark some of the graves.

Jewish cemetery located between the small towns of Sekota and Lalibela. It seems well maintained, perhaps by local villagers or visiting descendants.

Opposite page and page 124: Stelae in the Yeha graveyard. Slightly bent, over 2m in height, and unadorned, they are strangely similar to those found in the Gudit stelae field in Aksum, some 50km away.
Stelae and underground tombs of Aksum, Tigray, Ethiopia [2015]

The main stelae field in Aksum (different from the Gudit field mentioned on page 122) is a large cemetery dating from the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. The monolithic stelae were erected to commemorate royalty of the Aksum empire, who are buried underground. Cut in a rock similar to granite, they vary in form and style. The most decorated ones are carved to represent multi-story buildings with windows and doors. Three are over 20m in height. The largest, which lies broken on the ground, weighs 500 tons and, standing, would be 33m tall. The second largest (26m high) had been taken to Rome under the Italian occupation and was returned to Aksum in 2005.

Below the stelae field are the underground tombs of various Aksum kings and other royalty. The walls, ceilings, and floors of these tombs, and their access stairs, are made of large granite blocks mounted with impressive precision. Below the center of the stelae field, the so-called Mausoleum is a group of 10 underground funerary chambers on two sides of a corridor. Most of these tombs were excavated in the late 20th century. But looters had already visited them.

Next double page (125-127):
View over the stelae field, with the broken stela in the foreground.

Following double page (128-129):
In the corridor of the underground Mausoleum.

Inside one of the underground tombs.
This page and opposite page:
Photos showing the high precision of the assembly of the granite blocks.
Marabouts of the coastal Rif, northern Morocco [2017]

The Rif is the northern region of Morocco along the Mediterranean coast. The area west of the port city of Al Hoceima is dotted with marabouts, the tombs of locally venerated Muslim holy men. Unfortunately, many of these marabouts are poorly maintained. Pages 132 to 135 show pictures of some of them:

- Two marabouts probably dating from the 15th or 16th century in the village of Snada, 12 kilometers inland.

- The marabout of Al Haj Hassoun in Adouz. Al Haj Hassoun was a descendant of Abou Bakr, a companion of the prophet Muhammad. He created a “zaouia” (a kind of religious center) in Adouz in the 12th century. Built on a ridge above the Mediterranean Sea, the pretty village of Adouz was a piracy center against European ships between the 17th and 19th centuries.

- The marabout of Abu Yaqub Yusuf al-Zuhayli al-Badisi (1219-1313), more simply known as Abu Yaqub, in Bades. The famous Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) mentioned him as the last great Moroccan saint. The marabout includes a partially covered courtyard with a well to accommodate pilgrims. Today Bades is a tiny fishing village, but prior to the 16th century it was the main port of the city of Fez.

- A marabout said to be several hundred years old in the coastal douar (hamlet) of Taghzout at the end of the Mestassa valley.
Marabout of Al Haj Hassoun in Adouz.

Outdoor mihrab in the courtyard of the marabout of Al Haj Hassoun, for the pilgrims' prayers.
Marabout of Abu Yaqub in Bades.

Courtyard of the marabout of Abu Yaqub, with the opening of the well at the center-right of the photo.
Marabout in Taghzout.

Inside the marabout.
Jewish cemetery, Mellah of Fez, Morocco [2017]

The city of Fez was founded during the 8th-9th centuries CE. Its history has been tumultuous, under successive Arab and Berber dynasties. At its zenith, it was the political capital of an empire stretching between present-day Senegal and southern Spain and Portugal. Today it is still considered the cultural and religious capital of Morocco.

An important Jewish community has lived continuously in Fez between the founding of the city and the second half of the 20th century. In the 12th century the new Almohad dynasty took repressive measures against the Jews. But in the 13th century the Marinid dynasty allowed the Jewish community to recover and prosper. In the 14th century, violence against Jews in Spain brought a wave of Spanish Jews to Fez. In the late 1940s, most Moroccan Jews emigrated to Israel and other countries.

The Jewish cemetery of Fez is located in the Mellah, the historic Jewish quarter of Fez created in successive stages under the Marinid dynasty between the late 13th century and the 15th century. However, the cemetery is a more recent creation, dating from the early 19th century. For centuries on older Jewish cemetery was located near the royal palace, but at the end of the 19th century it was forced to close. Its graves were then moved into the Mellah cemetery. Today the Mellah cemetery is quiet, but well-maintained. It is frequently visited by descendants of its occupants.
One day Cleopatra asked Rabbi Meir: «Do you think the Dead will live again? But will they then be dressed or without their clothes?» Rabbi Meir replied: «Take the example of the grain of wheat: when it is planted, it is naked, and when it emerges from the earth in a spike, it is dressed in several successive envelopes. Even more so for men: never being buried “naked” (of mitzvah) they will certainly resuscitate with their clothes (of glory).»

This curious dialogue reported by the Talmud allows us to understand that for Judaism death is not an “end”, a final outcome, but on the contrary a preparation for a new life. It is the burial compared to the seeding of the wheat grain that makes this preparation possible. It explains the respect we owe to the body.
Necropolis of the Merinid dynasty, Fez, Morocco [2017]
The Merinid dynasty ruled Morocco between the 13th and 15th centuries (see page 136). The tombs in their necropolis are in ruins, but the site offers one of the best views over the old Medina of Fez.
Typical village graveyard,
Atlas mountains, Morocco [2016]
Ancient graves in the Sahara, southern Morocco [2020]

The Sahara desert in southern Morocco is dotted with numerous graves, most dating back several centuries, perhaps even thousands of years, when the region was more populated and crisscrossed by caravans than today.

Most of these graves are stone tumuli, with circular or oval footprints, typically a few meters in diameter and one to two meters in height. Each large tumulus is generally the burial place of several individuals, whose corpses were successively added, each one protected against wind and sand by an additional layer of stones.

Another type of grave is the so-called corbeille-shaped grave, which consists of a ring of relatively large stones surrounding a hard ground surface. (Page 117 shows examples of these two types of graves in Ethiopia.)

In areas where dunes are in perpetual motion, graves may get covered with sand, while previously covered graves may reappear.
Stone tumuli.
This page and next double pages:
Stone tumuli among dunes.
Corbeille-shaped graves.
Tomb of Sidi Naji, a Muslim holy man, in the desert.

Multiple graves on a gentle slope next to Sidi Naji’s tomb.
French royal necropolis, Saint-Denis, France [2020]

Located in the town of Saint-Denis, north of Paris, the cathedral of Saint-Denis is best known as a birthplace of Gothic art and the royal necropolis of France. An abbey church was first built at this location in the 5th century. Later, in the 7th century, Dagobert I, king of the Franks, ordered the transfer of the relics of Saint Denis, a bishop of Paris who died in 250, to this church. In the mid-8th century, another king of the Franks, Pepin le Bref, was crowned in this church. In the 12th century, the head of the abbey, Abbot Sugar, transformed the church into what is considered the first Gothic building. In the 13th century, under King Louis IX of France (Saint Louis), the nave was enlarged and extensively remodeled, and the church became the de-facto French royal necropolis. Restored in the 19th century, the church was raised to the rank of cathedral in 1966.

Today, the cathedral of Saint-Denis is the resting place of most of the kings and queens of France. The remains of 42 kings, 32 queens, 63 other royalty, and 10 great servants of the monarchy lie here. The first king to be buried was Dagobert I (603-639); the last was Louis XVIII (1755-1824), who was also the last king of France. Many of the medieval tombs are surmounted by “gisants”, recumbent marble statues representing their occupants in life size, with their eyes open and dressed in daily costume.

Opposite page: Tomb of King Dagobert I. This intricate sculpture was erected in the 13th century at the exact place where Dagobert had been buried in 639 next to the relics of Saint Denis. At the base of the sculpture, the gisant of Dagobert lies on his left side looking toward the tomb of Saint Denis. The two statues standing next to the gisant represent Dagobert’s wife Nanthilde (on the left) and his son Clovis II (on the right).

Stained-glass windows around the choir of the cathedral.
Opposite page:
Medieval gisants in the cathedral of Saint-Denis.

- Top, from left to right: Gisants of King Philippe V le Long (1294-1322), Queen Jeanne d'Eureux (1307-1371), third wife of King Charles IV, and King Charles IV le Bel (1294-1328).

- Bottom, left and center: Gisants of King Charles V le Sage (1338-1380) and his wife Queen Jeanne de Bourbon (1338-1378).

- Bottom, right: Gisant of Bertrand du Guesclin (1320-1380), a famous Breton knight, a military commander during the Hundred Year War, and a Constable of France for King Charles V.

Next double page:
Crypt (8th century) below the choir of the cathedral. It contains the simple black marble tombs of King Louis XVI, Queen Marie-Antoinette, and King Louis XVIII.

Below:
Tomb of the Dukes of Orleans in the cathedral. More recent than the gisants on the opposite page, this tomb makes the connection between the medieval and Italian Renaissance styles. Its base is adorned with sculptures of apostles and saints. It is surmounted by the gisants of:
- Louis (1372-1407), son of King Charles V,
- Valentine Visconti (1366-1408), wife of Louis,
- Philippe (1396-1420), son of Louis and Valentine,
- Charles (1391-1465), son of Louis and Valentine, and father of King Louis XII.
Priants (funerary statues representing praying people) of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette in the cathedral of Saint-Denis. They were commissioned by Louis XVIII, brother of Louis XVI, to celebrate the transfer of their remains to the cathedral and completed in 1830.
Invited by French King François I, Leonardo da Vinci traveled from Italy to Amboise in 1516, at the age of 64. There, he spent the last four years of his life at Clos Lucé, an elegant residence built in 1471, working on multiple projects. He died at Clos Lucé on May 2, 1519, leaving drawings, sketches, and manuscripts.

He was buried in the church of Saint-Florentin, which was part of the royal château d’Amboise. But the church was destroyed during the French revolution. His remains were later recovered and moved to the pretty Gothic chapel of Saint-Hubert built in the 1490s on the grounds of the château.

Chapel of Saint-Hubert.

Marble tombstone of Leonardo da Vinci with a bronze medallion representing his profile.
Gisant of Jean de Berry, Bourges, France [2022]

Previous double page and this page (above): Finely carved gisant (see page 154) of Duke Jean de Berry (1340-1416), brother of French King Charles V, located in the crypt of the Saint-Etienne cathedral of Bourges. A priant (see page 158) representing the duke's first wife, Jeanne d'Armagnac, is visible in the previous double page.

Below: Muzzled bear at the feet of the duke's gisant. The duke is said to have owned several bears.
Gisants of bishops, Rodez, France [2022]

This page and next page: Various tombs of bishops surmounted by gisants in the Notre-Dame de Rodez cathedral.
Tombs of bishops surmounted by gisants in the Notre-Dame de Rodez cathedral.
Merovingian sarcophagi, Rodez and Toulx-Sainte-Croix, France [2022]:

Sarcophagi believed to be, respectively, those of Saint Naamas (5th century) and Saint Dalmas (6th century), in the Notre-Dame de Rodez cathedral.

Trapezoidal limestone sarcophagi (7th century) excavated near the village of Toulx-Sainte-Croix.
Montparnasse Cemetery, Paris, France [2022]

This cemetery, the second largest in Paris, officially opened in July 1824. It occupies the former site of three farms.

Since its opening, more than 300,000 people have been buried here, including some notable musicians, poets, writers, philosophers, artists, actors, political figures, soldiers...

The cemetery contains over 35,000 tombs of various styles and sizes, several artfully decorated, packed between large alleys lined with trees. These six pages (168 to 173) show a few of these tombs.

Opposite page: Tomb of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), one of the most celebrated French poets, author of the poetry book titled Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil).

Here is a quatrain from one of his poems, Chant d’automne (from Les Fleurs du Mal):

Il me semble, béleurce par ce choc monotone,
Qu’on cloue en grande hâte un cercueil quelque part.
Pour qui ? – C’était hier l’été ; voici l’automne !
Ce bruit mystérieux sonne comme un départ.

and a fairly literal translation in English:

It seems to me, lulled by these monotonous shocks,
That somewhere one nails a coffin in great haste.
For whom? – Yesterday was summer; now comes autumn!
This mysterious noise sounds like a departure.

Below: Old tombs in the cemetery.
Jacques Aupick,
genéral de division, sénateur,
cancrin ambassadeur à Constantinople et à Madrid,
membre du conseil général,
du dépôt du nord, grand officier
de l'ordre impérial de la légion
d'honneur décoré de plusieurs
ordres étrangers,
décédé le 27 avril 1867,
a l'âge de 68 ans.

Charles Baudelaire,
son fils, décédé à Paris,
a l'âge de 46 ans le 31 août 1867.

Caroline Archenbaut Défayes,
veuve en premières noces de
M. Joseph François Baudelaire,
en secondes noces
de M. le général Aupick,
soeur de Charles Baudelaire,
décédée à Honfleur (Calvados),
le 16 août 1871 à l'âge de 77 ans.
Priez pour eux.
Double page (170-171): Tomb of Valentine Peigné-Crémieux (1855-1876). Married to Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte du Nouÿ on August 1st, 1876, she died on October 15, 1876 at the age of 21.
A painter and sculptor, J.-J.-A. Lecomte du Nouÿ created both the gisant on her tomb and the bas-relief representing her mother, Mathilde Crémieux (1834–1912), on the adjacent tomb.
Below: Close-up of the two bas-reliefs ornating the tomb of François Gérard (above).
Along with the medallion at the top of the tomb, they were created by the sculptor Antoine Laurent Dantan (1798-1878).

Left: Tomb of François Gérard (1770-1837), a prominent history and portrait painter. Two of his most famous history paintings are La Bataille d’Austerlitz and L’Entrée d’Henry IV à Paris. His portraits include those of Emperor Napoléon and Empress Joséphine. He was made baron of the Empire in 1809 by Napoléon.

Opposite page:
- Top left: Tomb of General Henry de Mylius (1784-1866).
- Top right: Tomb of Marquis Jules Albert de Dion (1856–1946) and his wife. A pioneer of the automobile industry, Jules Albert de Dion created a steam-powered car, with which he won the world’s first automobile race. He was elected at the French Senate in 1923.
- Bottom left: Tomb of Isaac Adolphe Crémieux (1796-1880). A Minister of Justice during the French Second Republic, he also served twice as president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. In 1870 he secured French citizenship for Algerian Jews.
- Bottom right: Tomb of Vincent Dauzats (1842-1884), an engineer who successively contributed to the Suez, Panama, and Corinth canals.
A typically French provincial cemetery, Carpentras, France [2022]

This page and opposite page: Graves and tombstone carvings in the old section of the cemetery.
Braman cemetery, Newport, Rhode Island, United States [2019]

This large cemetery, established at the end of the 19th century, contains over one thousand graves. It is a typical New England cemetery.

Headstone of the grave of a woman who died in 1892 at the age of 91.

View over a portion of the Braman cemetery.
Old Brookside cemetery, Chester, Vermont, United States [2019]

This smaller cemetery is another example of a typical New England cemetery. It has been in use since the 18th century. Its earliest headstone dates from 1770.

Next double pages (178-179): Entrance of the cemetery.

- The monument on the left was erected in 1884. It is dedicated to soldiers of the American Civil War (1861-1865).
- The names of Vermont soldiers who served during that war are written on four plaques posted on its base.

- The white house behind the Civil War monument is the renovated former hearse house (dating from 1830) that keeps the last horse-drawn hearse purchased in 1907.

- On the right of the photo, the 1850 Public Tomb behind the canon was used in the winter to store corpses when the frozen ground was too hard to dig graves.
  - Its walls are made of large granite blocks.

- The green decorative cast-iron fence between the hearse house and the public tomb dates from 1867.

View over a portion of the cemetery. Following a New England tradition, corpses are laid down facing east, with the headstone lettering facing west.
South cemetery, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, United States [2022]

This cemetery is the combination of several contiguous cemeteries established successively in the 18th and 19th centuries. The first, known as the Cotton’s Burying Ground, opened in 1721. The Proprietor’s Burying Ground was added next to it in 1830. Two more cemeteries were added in 1847 and 1871 on the south side of the first two.

In the 1700s, what would later become the Proprietor’s Burying Ground (on the east side of the Cotton’s Burying Ground) was the town’s hanging ground, where the gallows stood. Executions were carried out by placing the condemned on a cart under the gallows and letting the horses pull the cart, leaving the condemned hanging.

One particularly well-known execution was that of Ruth Blay, a 25-year-old schoolteacher, accused of concealing the death of her illegitimate child. Prior to her execution on December 30, 1768, the Governor’s pardon was expected, as the child had been stillborn and not murdered. But the sheriff did not want to wait and be late for his dinner, so he ordered the execution to proceed. The pardon finally came, but a little too late. Ruth Blay was buried in an unmarked grave in the cemetery.
Headstone of the grave of General Justin Dimick (1800-1871).

General Dimick served in the United States Army from graduation from West Point Academy until his retirement during the Civil War in 1863, participating in the Florida Wars against the Seminole and in the Mexican War. His son fought in the Civil War and was killed in action at the Battle of Chancellorsville (1863).
Grave of Levi Woodbury (1789-1851), a New Hampshire politician. After being elected Governor of New Hampshire in 1823, Levi Woodbury had a long career in the service of the American federal government. He eventually became one of the few U.S. politicians to have served in all three branches of the American government: first, as Senator from New Hampshire from 1825 to 1831; then, as Secretary of the Navy under President Andrew Jackson from 1831 to 1834; finally, as a judge on the Supreme Court from 1846 until his death in 1851.
Graves of Charles A. Sinclair (1849-1899) and his wife Emma (1855-1918).
Charles A. Sinclair was a well-known businessman, the president of a railroad company, and a hotel owner. He was a member of Masonic St. John’s Lodge No. 1.
Unusual tomb in the South cemetery.
Keeler cemetery, California, United States [2022]

This tiny cemetery in the desert southeast of the Sierra Nevada dates back to 1887.
Manzanar is the site of a concentration camp where more than 120,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II. This memorial monument stands in the camp's cemetery.
Purissima cemetery,  
Half Moon Bay, California,  
United States [2021]

This cemetery was created in the 1860s as the burial place for the residents of the village of Purissima, one of the earliest settlements along the Pacific coast in San Mateo County, south of San Francisco. Fifty-eight settlers were buried there. Due to issues such as crop failures and frequent floods, the village was abandoned before WWII. In 2017 the cemetery was sold to a new owner who cleaned the old graves and opened empty sections to green burials. The cemetery is set among pines and cedars, with a view over the nearby Pacific Ocean.

Tomb markers in the Purissima cemetery.
Tomb markers in the Purissima cemetery.
Union cemetery in Redwood City is one of the oldest burial grounds in San Mateo County (south of San Francisco). It opened in March 1859 and has been officially closed for burials since 1918. It contains special plots for Californians who fought during the Civil War and for the Masonic Order and the Improved Order of Red Men.

[The Improved Order of Red Men is a fraternal organization established in North America in 1834, whose rituals are modeled after those assumed to be used by Native Americans. The order has a tiered structure. The lowest tier consists of local units called “Tribes” and presided by a “Sachem”. Despite its name, the order was formed solely by, and for, white men, and remained open to whites only until 1974.]

Graves of Dalve family members.
Cornelius Svendsen Dalve was born on June 6, 1855, in Norway. He died on February 28, 1900, of cirrhosis liver. He bought a building in Woodside (then a lumber town), near Redwood City, and transformed it into a hotel, the Dalve Hotel. He ran this hotel with his wife Susanna. Together they had 9 children. Cornelius was a member of the Improved Order of Red Men.

Opposite page, top-left: Headstone of Axle William Westran. Born in Sweden in 1875, he was a resident of Redwood City for several years. He went to Santa Rosa on April 17, 1906, the day preceding the Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. He died there on April 18, from the collapse of his hotel. He was a member of the Improved Order of Red Men. The Metamora Tribe’s members laid his body to rest in their plot of the cemetery.

Graves of Dalve family members.
Cornelius Svendsen Dalve was born on June 6, 1855, in Norway. He died on February 28, 1900, of cirrhosis liver. He bought a building in Woodside (then a lumber town), near Redwood City, and transformed it into a hotel, the Dalve Hotel. He ran this hotel with his wife Susanna. Together they had 9 children. Cornelius was a member of the Improved Order of Red Men.

Opposite page, top-right: Headstone of George Edgar Filkins. Born in New York on August 1, 1842, he died in San Francisco on March 15, 1887. A graduate from the law school of Boston University, he served in the Union army from 1861 to 1866. He moved to California in 1881, where he was an attorney. He is buried in the Masonic plot.
Below: Headstone of William P. Wallace. Born in Denmark in 1824, he moved to San Mateo County as a teenager. There, in the 1860s, he became a successful lumber merchant. He died in 1877 from a scorpion sting, leaving no relatives.

Headstone of Christopher Columbus Bollinger. Born in 1843, he died on October 1, 1866.
Stanford mausoleum, Stanford University, California, United States [2021]

Located in the Arboretum of the Stanford University campus, this mausoleum contains the remains of Leland and Jane Stanford, the founders of the university, and of Leland Stanford Junior, their son, after whom the university was named.

Leland Stanford (1824-1893) was an American industrialist and politician. Prior to a political career, he built a business empire and was the president of railroad companies. He was later elected as the 8th Governor of California and a Senator from California to the United States Senate.

After the death of their son from typhoid fever in Florence, Italy, in 1884, Leland and Jane Stanford decided to use their wealth to do something for other people’s children. They founded the university.

The mausoleum was completed in 1889. It combines Greek and Egyptian styles, with Egyptian sphinxes on the front, and Greek female sphinxes on the back. These were originally placed on the front, but at Jane Stanford’s request, they were moved to the rear. Unlike the rest of the university, the mausoleum survived the 1906 earthquake intact.

The mausoleum is the site of an annual student Halloween celebration.
Egyptian sphinx in front of the mausoleum.

Greek sphinx on the rear side of the mausoleum.
Tomb of Maya King Ukit Kan Lek Tok’, Ek’ Balam, Yucatán, Mexico [2017]

Ek’ Balam is a Maya archaeological site located approximately 150km east of Merida, the capital of the state of Yucatán. It was first explored by archeologists in the late 1800s, but its extensive excavations date only from the 1980s and 1990s. Its most striking feature is the well-preserved stucco sculpture on the entrance wall of the tomb of King Ukit Kan Lek Tok’, located in the site’s largest pyramid, the so-called Acropolis. The sculpture represents the open giant mouth of a jaguar. Maya warriors are also depicted. We don’t know much about this king.

The Acropolis.
The tomb of Ukit Kan Lek Tok’ is located under the palapa at the top left of the pyramid.
Stucco sculpture representing the mouth of a jaguar, with its teeth, on the entrance wall of the tomb.

Another part of the same stucco sculpture showing Maya warriors.
Maya mummy, Campeche, Mexico [2017]
Double page (198-199): This mummy was discovered in 1995 in the ancient Maya city of Calakmul. It was then moved to the Archaeological Museum of Campeche set inside the old Spanish San Miguel Fort, where it is now on display.
Maya funerary masks, Campeche, Mexico [2017]

This page and opposite page: Funerary masks exhibited in museums of Campeche. They were found in the 1980s in tombs of the ancient Maya city of Calakmul, south of Campeche. Dating from 660 to 750, they are mosaics of pieces of jade, a hard gemstone that symbolizes the cycle of life and rebirth in Maya culture. It is believed that the faces represented by the masks are how Maya rulers wanted to appear before the gods of the underworld.
Cemeteries of the Oaxaca coast, Mexico [2021]

The Pacific coast of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, east of Puerto Escondido, is home to a series of small villages, each having its own colorful cemetery (panteón). Families regularly bring food, flowers, clothes, and all sorts of objects that their dead had liked during their lifetimes and leave them there. Even without visitors, the cemeteries feel as if they have been the scenes of recent celebrations.

These seven pages (202 to 208) show pictures of the cemeteries of two of these villages, Zipolite and Mazunte.
Tombs in the cemetery of Mazunte.
It would be hard to find a more spectacular resting place than this one, north of La Paz.
Cemeteries in the Andes, northern Chile [2015]

Cemetery in the village of Pachama (elevation: 3430m).
These cemeteries are located in villages built along a former Spanish route, the “Ruta de la Plata”, which connected Potosi to the port of Arica. Due to the harsh climate at these high elevations, the villagers use bright paint and plastic flowers to beautify the cemeteries.
Chinchorro mummies, San Miguel de Azapa, northern Chile [2015]

The Chinchorro people settled in the coastal valleys of present-day northern Chile and southern Peru around 7000 BCE. There, they developed mummification techniques, long before the Egyptians. Unlike the Egyptians, they applied these techniques equally to every member of their community.
This page and opposite page:
Chinchorro mummies on display in the Archaeological Museum of San Miguel de Azapa, near the city of Arica.
Resting place at the end of the world, Punta Arenas, Patagonia, Chile [2016]

Founded in 1894, the Sara Braun cemetery is the burial place of some of the richest and most famous families of Punta Arenas, and of less well-off immigrants and sailors. It is a mix of lavish mausoleums with marbles walls and bronze statues, modest tombs, and even stacked ensembles of tiny square crypts, among trimmed cypress trees. Most of the names on the tombstones indicate occupants of various European origins.

Double page (214-215), below: Ensemble of crypts. The entire structure contains hundreds of crypts lined on eight levels. This picture shows only a tiny portion of two of these levels. Stairs and railed walkways give access to the crypts.
Tomb of the “Société Française”, dated 1897.

Next two pages: Mausoleums of the Kusanovic and Menendez families.
Epilogue

So... does it make a difference for someone to be buried in an opulent mausoleum or in a modest grave? Probably not: if time is abolished in the beyond, why worry? The difference is for the living and the future generations.

I definitively admired the splendor of several opulent mausoleums and I marveled at the perfect geometry of Humayun's tomb in Delhi and the high precision of the stone masonry of Aksum's underground tombs. But I was occasionally embarrassed by the poor artistic taste and sheer ostentation of some pretentious tombs.

On the other hand, I often found simple burials, such as the old Kazakh graves of the Ustyurt plateau and the stone tumuli of the Sahara to be more deeply human, inspiring, and comforting. If I ever felt the benevolent presence of the souls of unknown departed, it was in such places.

While composing this book, a colorful poem / song by George Brassens (1921-1981), entitled Supplique pour être enterré à la plage de Sète (Plea to be buried on the beach of Sète) kept coming to my mind. Despite the poem's gloomy title, it is clear that Brassens had much fun writing and singing it. (Sète, a town on the French Mediterranean coast, is his birthplace.)

Below are some verses of this poem in French and an English translation (1). Despite the poem's gloomy title, it is clear that Brassens had much fun writing and singing it. (Sète, a town on the French Mediterranean coast, is his birthplace.)


Cette tombe en sandwich entre le ciel et l’eau, Ne donnera pas une ombre triste au tableau, Mais un charme indéfinissable.
Les baigneuses s’en serviront de paravent
Pour changer de tenue, et les petits enfants
Diront : “Chouette, un château de sable !”

Et quand, prenant ma butte en guise d’oreiller,
Une ondine viendra gentiment sommeiller
Avec moins que rien de costume,
J’en demande pardon par avance à Jésus,
Si l’ombre de ma croix s’y couche un peu dessus
Pour un petit bonheur posthume.

Pauvres rois pharaons ! Pauvre Napoléon !
Pauvres grands disparus gisant au Panthéon !
Pauvres cendres de conséquence !
Vous envieriez un peu l’éternel estivant,
Qui fait du pédalo sur la vague en rêvant,
Qui passe sa mort en vacances...

This tomb sandwiched between the sky and water
Will not cast a gloomy shadow on the picture
But add an indefinable charm.
Female bathers will come to use it as a screen
In order to get changed, and the little children
Will say: “Oh, Brilliant. Look a sand castle!”

And when, taking my mound as a kind of pillow
A fair nymph from the sea, should kindly come to sleep
With close to nothing on as swimwear,
I am asking pardon well in advance from Jesus
If the shade of my cross lies for a while on top
For a spot of posthumous bliss.

Poor Pharaoh kings! Poor Napoleon!
Poor departed greats, lying at the Pantheon
Poor ashes of consequence!
You’ll half envy th’eternal holiday-maker
Who dreams as he rides his pedalo on the waves
Who spends his death on vacation...