Bergerbos natural burial ground: An innovative burial place in the Netherlands

Abstract
Natural burial grounds represent a new burial provision in the Netherlands. We use Bergerbos natural burial ground to examine how the concept of natural burial grounds is interpreted, as well as the people who have chosen burial at Bergerbos. We found that an important aim of Bergerbos is to provide the users freedom to arrange burials the way they wish. Its mature woodland and aim of habitat preservation distinguish it from the most common interpretation of British natural burial grounds which create new habitat through the marking of graves with commemorative trees. These different interpretations of woodland burial carry implications for the preservation of the deceased’s individual identity. In the Netherlands such individuality is signified by permanent grave markers, while in the UK, the individual grave identities become subsumed into a shared collective memorial landscape over time. However, Bergerbos implemented strict regulations about materialized memorialization, which may affect the way bereaved can express the deceased’s individuality and the freedom they experience at Bergerbos. Burial records of Bergerbos show that age matters. Bergerbos enjoys popularity among baby boomers and parents of deceased babies. The notion of returning to nature provides people, especially those who are terminally ill, a sense of reconciliation.

5.1 Introduction
In the Netherlands, natural burial grounds constitute an addition to the existing cemetery landscape. The concept of natural burial grounds is a contemporary burial innovation which originated in the United Kingdom (UK). Since Ken West opened in 1993 the first natural burial ground Bergerbos: An alternative place of burial in the Netherlands. In M. Rotar & A. Teodorescu (Eds.) Dying and Death in the 18th-21st century Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

This chapter builds on earlier publications, published as:
burial ground in the city of Carlisle in northwest England, the number of such grounds has flourished to approximately 250 natural burial grounds (Clayden, Green, Hockey & Powell, 2010). The recent emergence of natural burial grounds has initiated a significant change in the way the dead are disposed as well as in the provision, design and management of burial space in the UK (Clayden & Dixon, 2007; Clayden, Green, Hockey & Powell, 2010).

At Carlisle, the practice of natural burial takes the form of woodland burial. In due course, woodland developed, as each grave is marked by the planting of a commemorative tree by family and friends of the deceased person. No other ‘permanent’ markers, such as memorial headstones commonly used at conventional cemeteries, were permitted; nor were floral tributes or personal objects that would identify the burial site (Clayden, Green, Hockey and Powell, 2010). Once woodland became established, the individual memorial trees and grave identities become subsumed into a shared collective memorial landscape in the course of time (Clayden & Dixon, 2007). Natural burial provides an environmentally sensitive alternative to traditional practices which are considered harmful to the environment. The former does not allow the burial of embalmed corpses and requires the use of a ‘biogradable’ coffin or shroud (Rumble, 2009).

Whilst woodland burial as initiated by West has remained the most typical interpretation of natural burial, different approaches to the concept have emerged as the number of natural burial grounds increases (Clayden & Dixon, 2007; Clayden, Green, Hockey & Powell, 2010). Natural burial grounds are not easy to define, as several studies on natural burial grounds demonstrate that the whole practice is fluid in its interpretation, with no single model either in the form of landscape or practice for natural burial. Natural burial grounds can vary greatly in ownership, location, design and management (Clayden & Dixon, 2007). The principle purpose is to co-ordinate the burial of human remains with human concerns for the ‘natural’ environment (Powell, Hockey, Green & Clayden, 2011). New purposes to burial are offered, such as creating and preserving habitats (Clayden & Dixon, 2007).

The natural burial movement in the UK has inspired a similar one in the United States of America (US). In Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands a number of natural burial grounds have also been established (Rumble, 2009). In the Netherlands, natural burial grounds are still a relatively unknown phenomenon as seen in the small number of natural burial grounds in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2011, four natural burial sites could be identified: Westerwolde, Bergerbos, Weverslo and Venlo (Figure 1).

It is not certain when the first natural burial ground was established. However, the Bergerbos natural burial ground has actively promoted itself most strongly as the first natural
burial ground from its opening in 2003, while Westerwolde was established as a family cemetery in 1944, and slowly evolved from a conventional cemetery which opened to the public in 1955 into a natural burial ground, without the purpose of the site being formally defined as such (Branderhorst, 2007). Both the Weverslo and Venlo natural burial grounds were established in mid-2010. Throughout the country more and more initiatives are taken to develop natural burial grounds, privately owned or part of conventional cemeteries.

Figure 1. The locations of natural burial sites in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, little research has been conducted on natural burial grounds. This is an interesting research topic as studies in Britain have indicated an enormous impact on their existing burial landscape, because of the rapid growth of the provision of natural burial grounds since the early 1990s (Clayden & Dixon, 2007; Clayden, Green, Hockey & Powell, 2010). Although natural burial grounds are still relatively unknown, there are indications that it number will increase as two new natural burial grounds opened in 2010 and many new initiatives are taken to open other ones. The aim of this paper is to obtain more insight into the concept of natural burial grounds in the Netherlands as places of death and/or remembrance. We are interested in how the concept is implemented in the Netherlands as well as the people who choose this alternative to traditional cemeteries. We use a single natural burial ground to examine how the owner/manager has interpreted and implemented the concept of natural burial grounds. Burial records of this burial ground provide
information about the people that have chosen burial in this new type of burial ground. This study is a contribution to the existing literature that is mainly based on studies in Britain, and the focus of the present study to document the people who choose for burial at a natural burial ground differs from other studies that examine public understanding of natural burial (Clayden, Hockey & Powell, 2010), how and why people engage with natural burial grounds (Rumble, 2009), the motives for the selection of a memorial tree (Clayden & Dixon, 2007), and the role of farmers in the provision of natural burial grounds, their motivation for doing so and interpretation of the concept (Clayden, Green, Hockey & Powell, 2010).

To structure the paper, we used four interlinking features of cemeteries as identified by Rugg (2000). The features were formulated to define cemeteries, by comparing them with churchyards, burial grounds, mass graves, war cemeteries and pantheons. Rugg used secondary literature about burial grounds in the modern Western societies and identified the following features:

Ownership and purpose: A feature that distinguishes cemeteries is their ownership and purpose. In many European countries, the provision of burial space is provided by the municipality, with as its main purpose the interment of the dead.

Physical characteristics: Cemetery landscapes contain some obvious physical properties such as an established perimeter in the form of a boundary and entrance gate, which separates them from their surroundings as places with a special purpose.

The individuality of the deceased person: A further distinguishing feature of cemeteries is their ability to promote or protect the individuality of the deceased person. They offer each family the possibility to memorialize a particular individual and provide a sense of ownership of and control over a particular plot. Consequently, the identity of the deceased is preserved.

The site’s sacredness: This is the extent to which burial sites are regarded as sacred. Although this concept is not easy to define, Rugg focuses on the permanence of the site and its possibility for pilgrimage.

5.2 Methodology
Just as Clayden and Dixon (2007) and Rumble (2009) we focus on a single natural burial ground. Bergerbos was selected as it is the only natural burial ground in full operation in the Netherlands that explicitly presents itself as a natural burial site from its opening in 2003.
In this study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted to examine the Bergerbos natural burial ground from the viewpoints of the different actors involved, namely the manager and staff, and the ‘consumers’ of Bergerbos. Firstly, we conducted interviews with the manager/owner and staff of Bergerbos in order to examine how they interpreted and implemented the concept of natural burial grounds. The interviews provided information about management policies, their views on natural burial, the design, the people who have selected Bergerbos for burial and their motivations for doing so. We used the information provided by the website built by Bergerbos (www.natuurbegraafplaats.nl/bergerbos) as it yields additional information about how Bergerbos presents itself as a natural burial ground in terms of habitat creation, grave marking, and sites of remembrance, and how this is communicated to the public.

Secondly, we were interested in the people who chose for Bergerbos. A documentary film, broadcasted in a television series called *Kruispunt* by KRO (Catholic Radio Broadcasting), a Dutch public broadcasting organization, was used as it delves into personal stories of individuals who made Berberbos their choice. Also the documentary documents the final months of a terminally ill woman who gave her reasons for selecting her grave at Bergerbos.

Finally, burial records of the dead interred at Bergerbos were used to obtain more insight into the people that actually have chosen natural burial. The information from the burial records was provided by the management of Bergerbos. The burial records contain information about the age, sex, and the last place of residence of the deceased persons, as well as the date of death, the year of burial (in some cases this concerns the cremated ashes), and the period that the burial rights cover, ranging from 5 years to perpetuity. Using this information from the burial records, a database was established, which contained information of a total of 548 deceased persons as of mid-2010. For every case, we used the last place of residence and calculated the distance between residence and Bergerbos. The distance was calculated by a website that provides information on travel routes.

When analysing the burial records, several ethical considerations required our attention. The burial records contain very personal and detailed information about the deceased persons, whereas it was not possible to obtain permission from them. In order to treat the information with integrity, access to the data was limited to the authors only and no other persons had access to the data. To ensure confidentiality, no individuals have been identified and only aggregated information is presented in the study, upon which general statements and observations could be made.
5.3 The research context: The Bergerbos natural burial ground

Bergerbos was opened by the Kluijtmans family in 2003 in Sint Odiliënberg, located in the south of the Netherlands (Figure 1). In 1998 the family acquired approximately 6.5 hectares of pine forest, with the intention of selling the parcel in smaller plots to speculators. Shortly after the purchase the family discovered that the site had been designated as a burial site. After carrying out research and obtaining professional advice, including several visits to natural burial sites in the UK, the family decided to start a natural burial site themselves.

Figure 2 shows the number of burials at Bergerbos between 2003 and 2009. It started with five graves in 2003, and grew gradually to accommodate 503 graves. In April 2010 Bergerbos contained 548 graves in total. The growth illustrates an increased popularity of Bergerbos. This could be the result of the general public’s increased familiarity with natural burial grounds. There is still space for growth, as the capacity of Bergerbos is estimated at 5,000 graves. The manager of Bergerbos has high expectations for natural burial in the Netherlands. When every province has its own natural burial ground, he expects that these burial grounds will accommodate 30 percent of all burials.

Figure 2. Number of burials and reservations at Bergerbos (2003 –2009)

Source: Figure based on the burial records of Bergerbos

Besides burial, which is the main practice of disposal at Bergerbos, in 30 percent of the graves ashes were interred. The scattering of ashes is only done by the staff of Bergerbos at a place unknown to the bereaved family. In the early years the bereaved accompanied the scattering, but the management stopped this practice as the mourners changed the location and the nearby trees into personal places of remembrance, which did not fit within the
management policy of Bergerbos. It is also possible to reserve a burial site at Bergerbos. In total, 320 sites were reserved over the years, 272 for burial and 48 for the interment of ashes. The number of reservations decreased after 2008, as at the start of 2009 burial tax deductions were abolished. However, the number of ‘unofficial’ reservations at Bergerbos has increased. The manager explains that these reservations are known as ‘temporary reservations’ at Bergerbos, as they are for the short term only, provided to people who are terminally ill.

5.4 Features of the Bergerbos natural burial ground

Ownership and purpose
The first feature that Rugg (2000) distinguished to characterise cemeteries is their ownership and purpose. Bergerbos is privately owned, just as the other three natural burial grounds in the Netherlands. Although the exact number of cemeteries in the Netherlands is unknown, private ownership is not common for Dutch cemeteries (Van Dijk & Mennen, 2002; Wille, 2004). To ensure continuity with the burial specification after the death of the owners of Bergerbos, that is, the use of land only for natural burials, a foundation has been set up. In this way, the continuity of the natural burial ground is not reliant on particular individuals.

The principal function of Bergerbos is the interment of the dead. Great emphasis is placed on environmentally friendly burials. There is a free choice regarding how someone is actually buried, be that in an environmentally friendly coffin, a basket or a shroud. It is recommended that people should not be buried in synthetic clothing or shoes, but preferably in natural fabrics. Although it is recommended and not compulsory, it is estimated by the manager that 90 percent of the burials are environmentally friendly. In other countries, a requirement for natural burial is that the corpse should not be embalmed (see Rumble, 2009; West, 2010), which does not play a role in the Netherlands. Embalming is not a common practice in the Netherlands, as it has only been allowed since 1 January 2010, when there was a change in the Law on the Disposal of the Dead. Currently there are not many professionals who are qualified to embalm.

Natural burial entails environmentally friendly burials in ‘natural’ landscapes (Rumble, 2009). What is considered as ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ is a social construct and people have different ideas about this (Castree, 2003). In our study of how the concept of natural burial is being interpreted and implemented at Bergerbos, the ideas of the manager and staff will be presented throughout the paper. However, different ideas about what a natural burial ground entails and how it is used are found among the different actors involved (to be discussed further).
An important goal of the Bergerbos management is to reach a compromise between respecting the needs of the environment and the wishes of the relatives. Bergerbos strives for complete freedom to arrange burials that satisfy the bereaved’s wishes. The website of Bergerbos states, “Freedom is the key to this place of rest”. This is similar with many British natural burial grounds that offer a greater choice for bereaved people to deal with their deceased loved ones as compared to conventional cemeteries (Powell, Hockey, Green & Clayden, 2010). At Bergerbos, it is for example possible to hold a ceremony in the open, at the weekend or even at night. It does not operate fixed opening and closing times; people are free to visit the graves whenever they want. According to the manager:

At a regular cemetery, dogs are not allowed. Even if you come here with a horse, you are welcome. Why should that matter? Why should I close at 6 o’clock? Some people have the need to visit the grave at 9 o’clock. That is what I call freedom.

The freedom at Bergerbos is in line with changing ideals, values and shifts in attitudes toward death. People who are dissatisfied with the usual burial options opt for ceremonies of their own choice, by way of ‘do-it-yourself’ funerals (Enklaar, 1995; Sax, Visser & Boer, 1989). As an example, a nudist called the manager of Bergerbos and asked if it was possible to be buried naked. After having checked that this was legal, it was allowed. In some cases there is no official undertaker involved, and the families and friends arrange the funeral in the way they wish and therefore are more engaged with the funeral arrangements.

The manager expressed the view that the emotional engagement with the bereaved persons is most essential in the concept of natural burial grounds. The manager argued that it is awful when mourners visit the grave of a loved one in a churchyard and there is no person around:

It is cold, empty, there is no atmosphere. We take care of people, we listen to them, and for others who don’t have that need, then we just put our hand out and greet them.

One mother, whose son was a victim of a murder and buried at Bergerbos, told the staff that the conversations at Bergerbos are her best therapy. Every Sunday afternoon it is possible for the bereaved to meet for coffee. On average about 40 persons attend this occasion, and it is a way of getting together and talking with people. From these meetings, new relationships between widows and widowers have occurred. Every year a Christmas celebration is organized. In 2007, about 700 people attended this celebration and about 1000 were
estimated to be present in 2008 (ANP, 2008). A mother who buried her deceased daughter at Bergerbos went to the celebration in 2009 and described on her weblog that the family who owns Bergerbos greeted her by her first name. This touched her in the following way:

How do they remember everyone’s name? There are so many people buried and they really know everyone. That does something. That feels so good. It provides a feeling of safety. You feel at home; it gives a sense of belonging (Natuurbegraafplaats, 2009).

This experience illustrates the emotional engagement between the owners/manager and the bereaved people at Bergerbos. Together with the meetings organized at Bergerbos, it provides a place for increased opportunities for social interaction and creates a community of bereaved.

**Physical characteristics**

One obvious physical property of a cemetery is an established perimeter in the form of a boundary and entrance gate that set the cemetery apart as a place with a special purpose (Rugg, 2000). At Bergerbos there are no fences and no traditional entrance that close off the burial ground from its surroundings. This is similar to British natural burial grounds, as frequently the perimeter boundary is indistinguishable from the adjacent fields (Clayden, Hockey & Powell, 2010). Consequently, at Bergerbos the worlds of the living and the dead are not set apart by a clearly established boundary, but are linked by the funeral practices, death rituals and memorialization of the dead (Francis, Kellaher & Neophyte, 2005).

The natural burial ground has several facilities. In a small dell, there is an open place with wooden benches where mourners can conduct an outdoor ceremony (Figure 3). The auditorium, known as the funerary meeting centre, provides a place for an indoor ceremony. There are also toilets for visitors (Figure 4). This auditorium is partly built into the side of a hill and stands out because of its organic architecture. Transparent glass walls provide views of the surroundings fields and woodland (Hulsman & Hulsman, 2008).

The design of Bergerbos differs from the ordered internal layout of a conventional cemetery, as there are no serried ranks of graves, no traditional headstones and no immaculate pathways. Graves lie as selected throughout the woods. Societal divisions disappear as the social and status structures of society are not reflected and expressed in the form and arrangement of the cemetery’s landscape (Francis, 2003). The allocation of space for deceased children in the centre of the burial ground is an exception. A marker in the form of a metal butterfly sets the space apart. The symbolism of butterflies is known across the
Netherlands as a reference to the transition from life to death. The butterfly that flies out of
the chrysalis symbolizes the soul that rises from the mortal remains. The transformation from
caterpillar to butterfly strikingly resembles the Christian belief in the transition from life to
death and resurrection (Klaassens, Groote & Huigen, 2009; Peelen & Altena, 2008).

Figure 3. Outdoor ceremonial area at Bergerbos

Source: Jos Nacken Rouwreportage

Figure 4. Ceremonial hall/visiting centre at Bergerbos

Source: Jos Nacken Rouwreportage

Traditional headstones, another important physical feature of cemeteries, are not permitted at
Bergerbos. However, it is possible to mark the grave. Markers used at Bergerbos include a
stone, a ring of small stones, a rock, a boulder, a wooden sign, or a tree or shrub. Artwork is
also permitted as a grave marker, but this needs approval from the management first. In
practice, a limited number of trees have been planted at Bergerbos. As the natural burial
grounds contain mature woodland, there is hardly any space for new trees. Just like the other
three Dutch natural burial grounds, Bergerbos is located in mature woodland and the overall
management philosophy is to leave nature to its own devices. Although in both the
Netherlands and the UK the most particular interpretation of natural burial is woodland
burial, they seem to differ in their purpose. In the Netherlands, the graves are located in
mature woodland, offering a ‘natural’ location for burial, whereas in Britain woodland
grounds are established on former agricultural land where the commemorative trees, planted
on each grave, will become woods in due course. Much value is placed “on trees for their
perceived permanence and presence and the way in which they may embody aspects of
personal and cultural memory, thereby facilitating and sustaining relationships beyond the
grave” (Clayden & Dixon, 2007, p. 240). In practice this means that natural burial grounds
are described as woodland burial grounds, even though no woodland may yet exist, and
might never be experienced in the bereaved’s own lifetime (Clayden, Hockey & Powell, 2010).

The bereaved at Bergerbos, who can not mark the grave by a tree, like to invite life at the grave by putting nesting boxes in the nearest tree. Currently there are more than 100 nesting boxes in place at Bergerbos. According to Rumble (2009), “butterflies, birds and toads around the grave are all joyous celebrations of life and often the physical presence of butterflies, dragonflies and birds were interpreted by the bereaved to signify an intimacy with the deceased via the insect or bird symbolically representing the ‘spirit’ of the deceased” (p. 193).

**Individuality of the deceased person**

Similar to traditional cemeteries, the marking of graves at Bergerbos offers a place for memorializing a particular individual and provides a sense of ownership of and control over a particular grave (Rugg, 2000). The marking of individual graves is very important at Bergerbos; according to the manager only about ten percent of the graves at Bergerbos remain unmarked. However, the possibility of locating a specific grave is less easy. From time to time, assistance from the staff is needed to locate a particular plot. Especially in seasons when the trees and bushes are in full bloom it is more challenging to locate and access a grave. The different interpretation of woodland burial between the Netherlands and the UK affects the site’s ability to promote or protect the individuality of the deceased as well. While in the Netherlands the individuality of the deceased is protected, in the UK, the individual memorial trees and grave identities become subsumed into a shared collective memorial landscape over time (Clayden & Dixon, 2007).

The material objects placed at the memorials enables the bereaved to reconstruct the deceased’s identity (Francis et al., 2005). Regulations at the natural burial ground only allow objects made out of natural, perishable or biodegradable materials. The bereaved may follow some of management’s regulations, but find small ways to distinguish their grave or they may resist management by persisting with personal objects not permitted by formal rules (Francis et al., 2005). In some cases this might cause tensions between different users of Bergerbos. The manager explains: “An example is a mother and a daughter, who respectively buried their husband and father [at Bergerbos]. They are disturbed by some of the other graves nearby, and that is something they make very clear by email and sometimes in a letter. They talk about kitschy graves (‘praalgraven’). And sometimes I think they are right”.

Regularly, the staff talk with the bereaved to explain which objects are not suitable for natural burial sites, such as the big white eagle which was placed at one grave. The staff used different measures to indicate what they believe is appropriate at Bergerbos. Objects
that are not allowed will be removed and in several cases the staff have painted polished white figures green, to make them less noticeable. One case at Bergerbos illustrates that different interpretations of natural burial do not occur solely between management and users, but can occur at one single grave as well. The family and family-in-law of a deceased man fought symbolically over the ownership, control and power of his grave. Against the wishes of one family who wanted a ‘natural’ grave, the other family placed a permanent marker and ‘kitschy’ items.

The management policies have changed over time, so that regulations about materialized memorialization are enforced more strictly now than in the beginning. In the initial period it was uncertain whether people would be interested in this new type of burial and so the management made more concessions. The original concept for Bergerbos has been modified through their consumption and use (see also Clayden, Creen, Hockey & Powell, 2010). The opening sentence of the 2010 information leaflet of Bergerbos states, “Important! Don’t make a churchyard out of Bergerbos!” (Natuurbegraafplaats Bergerbos, 2010, p. 2). On the following pages there is an appeal to obey the rules and regulations in order to retain the natural character of Bergerbos. Occasionally meetings are organized and lists provided to inform people about plants that are native to woodland. Plants that are not allowed will be removed from the graves. For example, when daffodils, which are seen as exotic plants, have finished flowering, the staff will remove them with the bulb, so they will not come up next spring. These regulations are implemented in order for Bergerbos to maintain its ‘natural’ character. At Bergerbos, some graves are seen as more natural than others. A walk through Bergerbos reveals that the majority of the graves are marked by a boulder and plants. Some graves featured objects to distinguish the grave, such as hiking shoes, candles, exotic pot plants or large monuments, which are reminders of the less restrictive early years of Bergerbos. The manager reckons that 80 percent of the graves are natural, while the other 20 percent are viewed as less appropriate for a natural burial ground.

In 2010, the children’s graves at Bergerbos were not much different from the other graves. It took the staff much time, effort and many conversations with the relatives to get the graves to look ‘natural’. Nowadays, a decreasing number of deceased children are buried at Bergerbos, and this could be a result of the stricter rules concerning materialized memorialization. Marking the grave of a stillborn child is an important way for parents to integrate them socially into the worlds of both the living and the dead. It helps them to constitute the social identity of their child as well as their own as parents (Peelen, 2009). At conventional cemeteries it seemed that in particular parents have a pressing need to be active at the grave, to bring or do something, to redo and rearrange, to express an ongoing sense of loss that characterizes their grief. At many cemeteries the boundaries of activities considered
appropriate were expanded to accommodate the parents’ expressions of mourning (Francis et al., 2005). This is not the case at Bergerbos and at the recently opened natural burial ground in Venlo which is also operated by the manager of Bergerbos. From the start, they implemented strict regulations about the height and the material of the memorial, the use of native flowers and decorations, in order to limit conflicts between users and management. This development toward a more ‘natural’ character at Bergerbos and Venlo is also reflected in the terms and conditions of the natural burial ground at Weverslo.

The site’s sacredness
A feature that characterises burial sites is the extent to which they are regarded as ‘sacred’. Although the concept is in itself difficult to define and many cemeteries are in principle secular institutions, they are for the most part considered sacred in the sense that the site is regarded with respect and protected from activities deemed ‘disrespectful’ (Rugg, 2000). Certain behaviour that would be considered as disrespectful at traditional cemeteries is accepted at Bergerbos, for example picnicking near the grave of a loved one, the different ways the funerals are held at various hours, children playing in the small playground of Bergerbos or people walking with their dog.

Two other closely associated elements that could be regarded as a measure of the sacred nature of burial sites are pilgrimage and permanence (Rugg, 2000). Since the majority of the graves at Bergerbos are marked they provide a place for pilgrimage. According to the manager, the length of the visits to Bergerbos is greater than at conventional cemeteries. This could be explained by recreational motives to visit the burial ground as well (Rojek, 1993), and by the distance between the place of residence of the bereaved people with the burial ground, which will be discussed later. When visiting the natural burial ground, for some bereaved people it is difficult to discard certain rituals usually performed at regular cemeteries, especially when natural burial was the wish of the deceased. In contrast with traditional cemeteries, candles are not allowed at Bergerbos, as they are a potential fire hazard, and because they are not regarded as biodegradable material. At the entrance of Bergerbos an alternative place is provided for candles, where one can leave the name and a picture of the deceased (Figures 5a and 5b). The number of candles found there illustrates a desire of the bereaved to continue this traditional practice of commemoration.

Pilgrimage may also occur before death has taken place, since it is possible to select and mark a grave when reserving it. A staff member explains that the users of Bergerbos have different methods of selecting a location. A couple who had visited Bergerbos on a sunny afternoon, lay down on a blanket under a tree to experience how the spot felt. In other
words, they “tried out” a potential burial place. When the couple left they reserved the spot for the two of them.

Figure 5a and 5b. Candles placed at the entrance of Bergerbos

Photos: Mirjam Klaassens

The selection of a grave enables the creation of an emotional connection with one’s final resting place and provides a sense of permanence. The husband of a terminally ill woman explained in the Kruispunt documentary mentioned earlier that the site they selected together is sacred to them - sacred in the sense that they cherish that place. The degree of permanence varies for each grave, as the length of the burial rights differs. The majority of the burial rights covered 20 years (66%). This is in accordance with the burial provision at conventional cemeteries in the Netherlands. As a result of the costly practice of raising burial areas above the water level, the burial space is used carefully. This led to systematic reuse of the graves, which does not necessitate an expansion of the burial space.

Another way through which the graves derive an element of sacredness is through the presence of a dead loved one (Rugg, 2000). It is possible to rebury at Bergerbos, so that it is an option for mourners who are interested in Bergerbos to be buried at this natural burial ground and to be reunited with their deceased loved one after death. In other cases, the cremated ashes of deceased next-of-kin were interred in a shared grave.

5.5 The users of Bergerbos

The burial records of the deceased person buried at Bergerbos are used to obtain more insight into the people who are interested in natural burial. As more people in certain age groups die than in others, we compared the proportional distribution of the age at death of people buried at Bergerbos and the distribution of the age at death of the deceased between 2003 and 2009 in the Netherlands. The burial records show that age matters greatly. In particular, baby
boomers are buried at Bergerbos. The burial records show that the average age at death of both women and men buried at Bergerbos was 63 years and therefore considerably lower than the average life expectancy of Dutch women (82 years) and men (78 years) in 2008 (Statistics Netherlands, 2010). The sex of the deceased buried at Bergerbos seemed not to affect the choice of Bergerbos. The data suggest that in many of the age categories the proportion of men as compared to women is not much different, apart from the age categories 60 – 90 years. This can be explained by the higher death rate of males in those age groups.

The burial records indicated that parents of deceased or stillborn babies were a big group of ‘consumers’, in particular in the initial years of Bergerbos. A possible explanation for their choice of Bergerbos is provided by Bleyden (2010). He cites, in his research on the materialities of absence after stillbirth, Sarah, a mother who buried her stillborn son Damien. She “took comfort from knowing that Damien lay in a ‘natural’ environment, even thought ‘nature’ had caused his death…..’Nature’ was now, configured as a source of strength and in the natural environment of the grave Damien had ‘given’ her, Sarah could find peace” (Bleyden, 2010, p.77). However, the number of babies and small children buried at Bergerbos is on a slight decrease. As described earlier, this can be the result of the stricter regulations concerning the objects that mark the graves that are required to conform to the practice of maintaining its natural character.

The burial records provide information about the last place of residence of those buried at Bergerbos. Although we cannot compare these distances with conventional cemeteries, Rugg (2000) indicates that people tend to be buried within their own district or town (Rugg, 2000). We found that the mean distance between the last place of residence in the Netherlands and Bergerbos is 41.1 kilometers (SD=57.9). A small majority of the persons buried at Bergerbos came from the surrounding areas, whereas about 40 percent lived further than 25 kilometers away, and within this group, 25 percent lived further than 48 kilometers away. The catchment area of Bergerbos is not only regional, because many came from other parts of the country (Figure 6). People from Germany and Belgium, in particular from the border region, are buried at Bergerbos as well. As such, the burial records illustrate that this new type of burial provision has attracted people across boarders and from far beyond the region.

In the interview with the manager of Bergerbos, the people interested in Bergerbos were discussed. The manager indicated that the level of education of those interested is a decisive factor for choosing Bergerbos. Furthermore, as the burial records showed, the manager explains that the age of the deceased at Bergerbos is lower than at traditional cemeteries. According to him, a considerable number of the buried people were in their twenties. They did not die a natural death; they died, for example in traffic or industrial
accidents or while engaging in more risky sports such as mountain climbing. In these cases, presumably the parents, the baby-boom generation, make the choice of burial at Bergerbos. The ‘consumers’ of Bergerbos are described by the staff and manager as not truly ‘green’, but rather as people with a love for nature. It appears that the natural setting of the burial ground is more important in their decision-making than the desire for a more ecological alternative to traditional forms of disposal.

Figure 6. The last place of residence of deceased people buried at Bergerbos

According to the manager of the natural burial ground, of the people who are buried at Bergerbos, many were diagnosed with cancer and made the choice together with their spouse for this new concept of burial provision. In these cases, the disease is terminal and the progression towards death gradual, which enables the couple, compared to sudden deaths, to have to a certain extent control over, and plan events, which can help them to come to terms or find peace with approaching death. The ‘natural’ landscape of Bergerbos plays a pivotal role in this process. It provides a sense of calmness. A terminally ill woman in the Kruijspunt documentary said: “[At Bergerbos] you can compose your thoughts and you’re away from
the everyday routine. As soon as you are in nature, you don’t have that hectic feeling”. The changing of the seasons helps one to understand the seasonality of human life itself. For many burial at a natural burial ground is seen as a return to nature, to become part of a broader circle of life. The manager explains:

> They come to Bergerbos and are struck by a feeling that makes them think: ‘This is it, this is what makes it acceptable, here I can come to terms with what has happened. This is a positive place’. The trees, bushes, the birds, the squirrels, everything is alive, and this creates a different sphere from a cold place.

### 5.6 Conclusion and discussion

In this paper we use the Bergerbos natural burial ground to understand what a contemporary place of death looks like and how it is communicated to the public. We examine how the concept of natural burial grounds is interpreted and implemented in the Netherlands, as well as the people who have chosen to be buried at this natural burial ground. To examine this, we applied a mixed-methods approach.

The privately owned natural burial site offers environmentally friendly burials in a ‘natural’ landscape. An important aim of Bergerbos is to provide the users the freedom to arrange burials that satisfy their wishes and select a favourite spot to be buried. The selection of the burial place and the possibility to visit it during life makes it possible for people to create a sense of place. The freedom offered at Bergerbos is in line with contemporary mortuary rituals that are more varied and informal, as well as more individualized and personal (Wouters, 2002). Another purpose of the natural burial ground is the emotional investment with the bereaved persons. Through regular meetings and the annual Christmas celebration a community of bereaved is created.

The design of Bergerbos differs from conventional cemeteries, as the graves lay as selected throughout the woods and are not marked by traditional headstones, but with boulders in particular. In both the Netherlands and the UK, the most common interpretation of natural burial is woodland burial. Yet they seem to differ in their purpose. In the Netherlands, the graves are located in mature woodland and offer an attractive place to visit, whereas in the UK woodland burial grounds may not be realized for many years as the commemorative trees planted on each grave take considerable time before they become woods.

This different interpretation of woodland burial has implications for the site’s ability to protect the individuality of the deceased as well. While in the Netherlands the individuality
of the deceased is protected by grave markers, in the UK, the individual memorial trees and grave identities become subsumed into a shared collective memorial landscape over time. Nevertheless, as Bergerbos has implemented strict regulations about the objects accompanying the graves, this may affect or clash with the way the bereaved want to express the individuality of the deceased and reduce the notion of freedom. While the permanent grave markings at Bergerbos provide a context for pilgrimage, the degree of permanence varies for each grave, as the length of the burial rights differ. This momentary existence of the majority of the graves differs from the British woodland burial grounds, where the memorial trees are part of a dynamic and enduring physical manifestation of the deceased.

When studying the people who make the choice for burial at Bergerbos, it appears that age matters greatly. In particular, baby boomers are buried at Bergerbos. We found that a big group consists of people who are terminally ill and chose, together with their spouse, this new concept of burial provision. In these cases, the progression towards death is often gradual, which enables a certain extent control over events and can help the dying and their loved ones to come to terms or find peace with the approaching death. Natural burial at Bergerbos is experienced as a return to nature, to become part of a broader circle of life and Bergerbos plays a pivotal role in this. The changing of the seasons helps people to understand the seasonality of human life itself. Another big group of users are parents of deceased or stillborn babies. However, the number of burials is on a slight decrease. Possibly, this is the result of the stricter regulations concerning the objects that mark the graves that are required to conform to the practice of maintaining its natural character. Marking the grave, for example of a stillborn child, is an important way for parents to acknowledge their existence and to constitute the social identity of their child as well as their own as parents.

According to the manager it is especially the higher level of education of the baby boom generation compared to the proceeding generation, which plays an important role in the choice of Bergerbos. Moreover, he describes the ‘consumers’ of Bergerbos as not truly ‘green’, but rather as people with a love for nature. Arguably, the natural location carries a greater appeal than the desire for a more ecological alternative to traditional forms of disposal. Further research into the motivation of the consumers of Bergerbos is required in order to examine whether it is the cause of death, such as terminal diseases, that motivates the baby-boom generation to choose the natural burial ground or whether other background characteristics such as the level of education are more vital in the decision-making. In spite of this, in the future when the baby boom generation reaches the end of their life trajectory, a big group of potential consumers will enter the market for natural burial grounds.

Acknowledgements
We like to thank Huub Kluijtmans for kindly providing access to the burial records of Bergerbos.

Endnotes
[1] Although not much research has been done on Dutch cemeteries and the exact number is unknown, the database of The Netherlands Department for Conservation offers the most accurate picture. Of the 3,872 registered cemeteries, 60% can be identified as ‘special’ cemeteries established by a religious organization, 36% are owned by municipalities, 3% are privately owned, 1% is defined as war cemeteries (Wille, 2004).

[2] The other burial rights issued at Bergerbos covered 5 years, only for baby graves (3 graves), 10 years (43 graves), 20 years (359 graves), 30 years (10 graves), 35 years (7 graves), 50 years (102 graves), 80 years (1 grave), 100 years (11 graves), in perpetuity (6 graves).

References


