

The place meanings of natural burial sites

A case study on Hillig Meer, Eext.

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Abstract

Natural burial sites are relatively new places in the Netherlands. There are fifteen sites at the moment. A natural burial site is a final resting place in a nature area, which is maintained with the aim of merging a burial place into the existing natural landscapes. One of the sites is called Hillig Meer and is located in Drenthe, the Netherlands. Natural burial site Hillig Meer is the case study that is examined in greater depth. The research aim is to clarify the place meanings of natural burial sites. The research focuses on the place meanings towards the natural burial site of people who want to choose natural burial and relatives. Semi-structured interviews were held and analysed. The expectation was to find types of place meanings based on how the place looks, how the place is experienced and the interactions in place. The findings suggest that a process of identification with the concept of natural burial can be added to how place meanings are constructed on the sites. The identification is expressed in the following place meanings. The natural burial site is considered a unique place with unique characteristics. One of the reasons to choose for natural burial is the natural environment the places offer. Besides that, the natural burial site Hillig Meer has the distinctive place meaning of everlasting peace. The guarantee of everlasting graves is exceptional in the Netherlands. In addition to that, the place is experienced as a way to 'return to nature'. The main difference between people who choose for natural burial and relatives in their place meanings is in the way how they are constructed because the influence one has on the choice for natural burial differs between them. The main recommendation of the research is thus that further research has to be done in the changing needs in how, when and where people want to remember and how these changes relate to the emergence of natural burial sites.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aim and research questions

The topic of the thesis presented here is the place meanings of natural burial sites. The research question to be answered is:

Which place meanings are ascribed to a natural burial site by people who choose natural burial or by relatives?

Based on the literature, different meanings are ascribed to a natural burial site: a place where life, nature, death and burial come together. The aim of the thesis is to find out which meanings are ascribed to the natural burial site by people who choose for a natural burial site and by relatives. The topic is explored on the natural burial site Hillig Meer in Eext, province of Drenthe. Related words used for natural burial are woodland burial or green burial. These words are used in the literature and have overlapping meanings. Throughout the thesis, the word natural burial is used.

1.2 Scientific and societal relevance

Within cultural geography, death is recognized as a cultural phenomenon. Whereas death is a universal experience, the way that death is dealt with differs amongst different places and for different people (Klaassens, 2011). That makes death an experience that is loaded with cultural values and meanings, which are expressed and reproduced (Maddrell, 2016). The thesis presented here links to studies that have been done about current changes in the way death is experienced and expressed in the Dutch society (Davies & Park, 2012; Klaassens, 2011; Venbrux et al., 2008; Wojtkowiak et al., 2010). The process of secularization has changed death rituals in the Netherlands (Venbrux et al., 2008). For example in regard to funerals, the funeral has gradually become a customized event to express a 'biography' of the person who deceased (Venbrux et al., 2008). One of the consequences is an increase in the choices of funeral types (Venbrux et al., 2008). One expression form of the new demands in the funeral branch is the wish to reconnect with nature (Yarwood et al., 2015). Natural burial is one of the new final resting places in reaction to these demands. The first natural burial site was developed in Britain, Carlisle in 1993. Yarwood et al. (2015) note that although the first British natural burial site stems from 1993, before the rise of modernity 'natural burial' was the mainstream way to be buried, but steadily we denaturalized death. Now death is re-naturalized again with the invention of natural burial sites. So although natural burial sites seem like a recent innovation, the practice of natural burial dates from way earlier.

The development of natural burial sites in the Netherlands has been researched by Klaassens & Groote (2010). Their article has focused on the meaning of natural burial from the perspective of the managers of natural burial sites. This thesis links to the research by highlighting the meaning of a natural burial site from the perspective of the persons who reserved a grave or who are relatives.

From a societal perspective, the research provides a context for the place meanings of new natural burial sites in the Netherlands. There are multiple attempts to start new natural burial sites in the Netherlands (De Haas & De Vries, 2013). Natural burial sites are places where environmental views on burial are expressed, rather than faith-based perspectives (Maddrell, 2011). The place meanings constructed on these new types of places are thus relevant for the further development of natural burial in the Netherlands. Also, the increased choices in the ways of shaping a funeral make place meanings on natural burial sites relevant. With the increase in the diversity of places for grief, this research provides an insight into the position of natural burial in comparison to other places of grief.

Also, the thesis aims to create a broader awareness of the importance in current times to officially record your personal wishes, because the choices have increased. This has two consequences. Where on the one hand you can create a funeral that reflects personal identities, on the other hand what is personal can be contested amongst for example relatives. By recording your personal wishes, there is more clarity for relatives in the short time they have to make such important choices. With the thesis, the aim is to create awareness that wishes in current times have to be communicated to professionals or those concerned because there are a lot more options available in the funeral branch.

Chapter 2: Natural burial sites

2.1: Defining natural burial sites.

Natural burial sites are final resting places in nature, where nature is the décor for the funeral, instead of changing nature to a funeral site (Yarwood et al., 2015). Natural burial sites have characteristics that make them fundamentally different places in comparison to traditional burial sites. A fundamental distinction is that nature is enrolled in natural burial sites, rather than a controlled view of nature where nature is adapted for the visibility of the graves (Yarwood et al., 2015). Where in a traditional cemetery nature is controlled to prevent it from interfering with the graves, in a natural burial site the grave is given to nature.

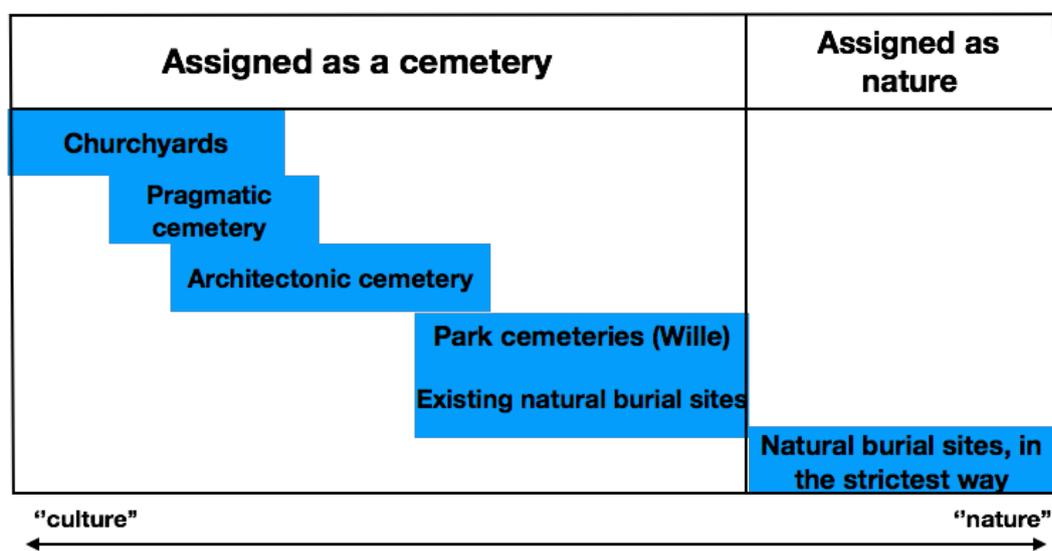
The prevalence of nature is seen in how the graves look on a natural burial site: a 'natural looking grave' is the aim over having a 'personal grave' if one chooses for a natural burial site. In regard to how the grave looks, the influence of nature is seen in the physical demarcation (Yarwood et al., 2015). Demarcation of a grave is usually only possible with restricted ecological materials such as a woodblock that fits into the environment and not with a regular headstone, as is the convention on traditional cemeteries. Also on a natural burial site, there is the possibility to reserve your own sites, for example under a specific tree or in a specific type of landscape. This is in contrast to a traditional burial site where the graves are demarcated and structured. In terms of the materials used for the burial, there are restrictions as well. All the materials for the natural burial have to be biodegradable and there are restrictions to for example the flowers that can be placed at the grave (Klaassens & Groote, 2010). In regard to appropriate behaviour, there are different expectations on natural burial sites (Klaassens & Groote, 2010). One of the most distinctive features is that animals, such as dogs, are allowed on the terrain. These specific regulations on natural burial sites make sustainability a shared value, and thus natural burial might be read in the wider discourse of green consumption (Goodman et al., 2010; Yarwood et al., 2015). Green consumption means that consumption choices shift towards new sustainable services, in order to change how the former service was carried out (Goodman et al., 2010).

When it comes to ownership of the natural burial sites, there is a difference with traditional burial sites. The municipality owns most traditional cemeteries in the Netherlands and the municipality has the control over the cemeteries (Molenaar et al., 2009). In contrast, natural burial sites are owned by a variety of organizations: private companies, environmental protection agencies, municipalities, landowners or farmers (Clayden et al., 2015). One of the consequences of the difference in ownership is the difference in how long one has the right to a grave between private and public cemeteries. *Grafrust* is the Dutch term denoting how long a grave can be kept. In general Dutch law, a grave lasts for at least 10 years, with the possibility to prolong the term (Van der Putten, 1993). After these terms, the grave is either prolonged or the grave will be cleared. When the natural burial site is privately owned, for example in the form of a foundation, the owners of the privately owned land cannot lose the rights to the land. Also, the Dutch law states that gravestones have to be continuously maintained in order to have an everlasting grave (Van der Putten, 2017). On natural burial sites there are no monuments and, in combination with the different type of ownership, an everlasting grave can be guaranteed. In other words: the grave is promised to be yours forever without the need for your relatives to make any further decisions about the grave.

So although natural burial sites differ in their appearances, the distinctions made are fundamental differences between natural burial sites and traditional burial sites (Hannah, 2008; Klaassens & Groote, 2010).

2.2 The development of natural burial in the Netherlands

In figure 1 Wille (2004) shows the different types of burial places ranging on an axis from 'culture' to 'nature' in the Netherlands. The figure shows that the most common types of final resting places are the pragmatic burial sites, closer to the 'culture' side of the axis (Molenaar et al., 2015). The natural burial sites move towards the right of the axis as 'nature' (Molenaar et al., 2015). The word 'Assigned' in figure 1 means how a place is denoted in the land-use plans of the municipality.



A schematic overview of the types of Dutch cemeteries on an axis from 'culture' to 'nature'.

Figure 1: Overview of types of Dutch cemeteries after Wille (2004).

The origins of the natural burial concept lay in Britain (Yarwood et al., 2015). In Britain, there are over 270 natural burial sites developed (Yarwood et al., 2015). After the first opening of a natural burial site in Britain, new natural burial sites emerged quickly (Maddrell et al., 2010). The steady growth of natural burial sites in Britain was the foundation for the natural burial movement (Maddrell et al., 2010). A factor that contributed to the growth of the movement was the Natural Death Centre, which published a book called 'The Natural Death Handbook' (Maddrell et al., 2010). The organization raised public awareness for natural burial. Also, books were published aimed at helping new natural burial initiatives to work in accordance with the natural burial principles. In response to the rising number of natural burial sites in Britain, the development has been coined the '*natural burial movement*' (Yarwood et al., 2015; Wienrich et al., 2003). In the Netherlands, Natural burial site Westerwolde, opened in 1955, is considered the first natural burial site (De Haas & De Vries, 2013). In the Netherlands, there were four natural burial sites in the year 2011 (Klaassens, 2011). By the time of April 2013, there were 14 natural burial sites out of a total from 4300 places of burial in the Netherlands (De Haas & De Vries, 2013). And in January 2018, there were fifteen natural burial sites in the Netherlands in combination with multiple

attempts to start new ones (Natuurbegraven Nederland, 2018). Figure 2 shows the natural burial sites identified on January 2018 in an arbitrary order (Begraven in de Natuur, 2018). Number 1 Hillig Meer is the natural burial site of the case study.

There is a difference in the type of development of natural burial sites between the Netherlands and Britain. Where in Britain a natural burial site is usually developed on agricultural land, in the Netherlands natural burial sites are usually developed in already existing natural areas (Molenaar et al., 2015). One of the explanations for the Dutch preference for woodland is the anonymity of woodland over an open field (Molenaar et al., 2015). In the Netherlands, the number of initiatives for natural burial sites is growing (Klaassens & Groote, 2010). Still, there are way less natural burial sites here in the Netherlands than there are in Britain. One of the reasons for the lower number of natural burial sites is the Dutch legislation. There are no everlasting graves; so burial places do usually not need to expand over time (Klaassens & Groote, 2010). That is why attempts to start new natural burial sites can be challenging since land is scarce and natural landscapes are often protected (Klaassens & Groote, 2010).

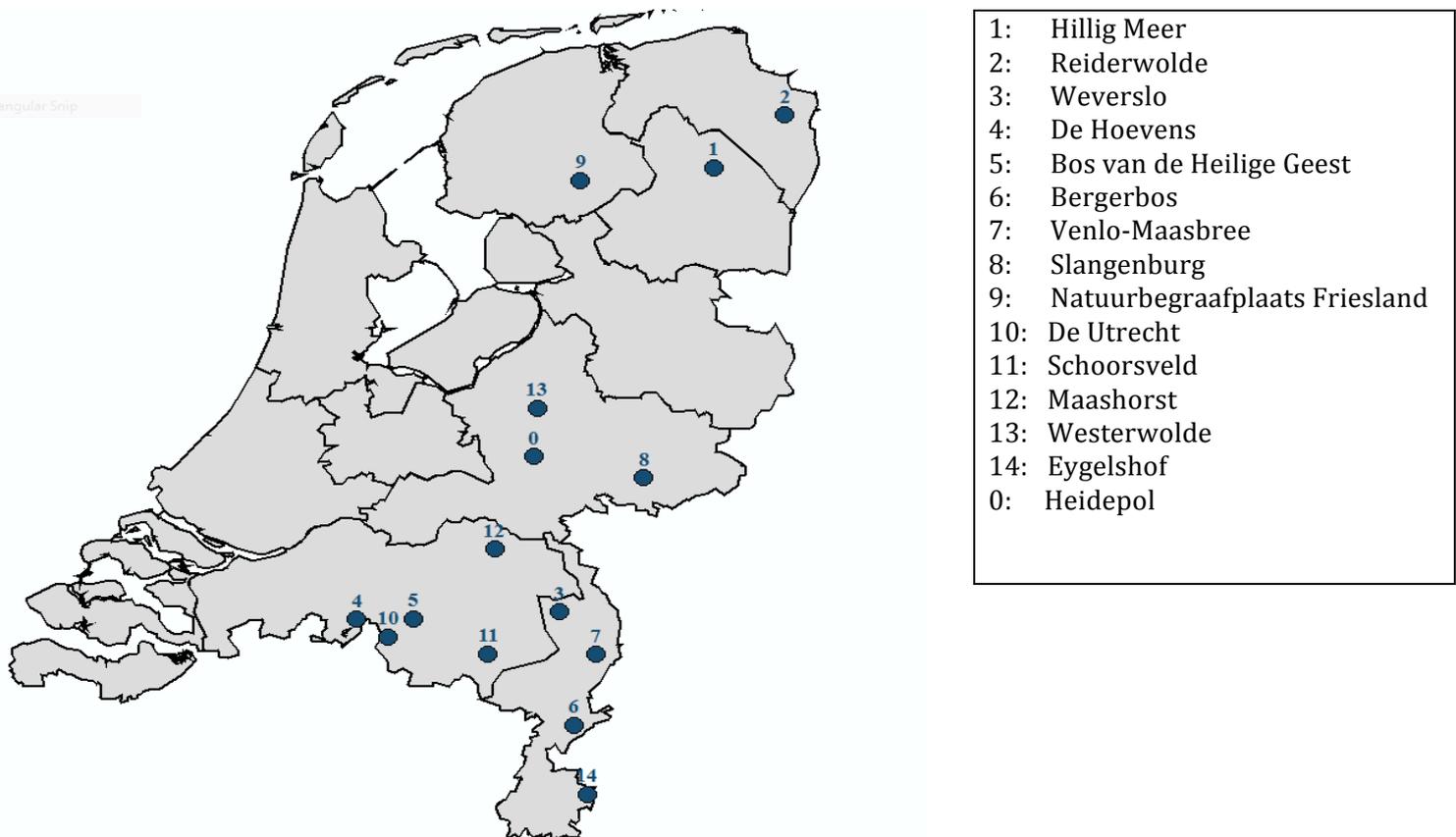


Figure 2: Map of existing natural burial sites (January, 2018)

2.3: Natural burial sites: new place meanings

Maddrell & Sidaway (2010) introduced the concept of 'deathscapes'. With the introduction of the concept of 'deathscapes' the relationships between deaths, the creation of meaning and the influence on spaces/places were recognized within geography (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010). Deathscapes imply that grief and mourning are experienced and marked in space, as well as in time (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010). Obvious places of death are a cemetery or a crematorium. But with the acknowledgement that death affects and unfolds in other places too, such as the sites of accidents or memorials, there is more attention for the ways in which people produce meanings related to death both at physical places as well as in their minds (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010). The concept of deathscapes exemplifies that places of death, such as natural burial sites, are imbued with meanings, which are produced and reproduced over time. That makes cemeteries not static places, but places that change in meaning and significance over time (Sloane; 1995; Warner, 1959).

The changes in the meanings of a traditional cemetery as a religious place have opened up new possibilities for burial (Venbrux et al., 2008). Natural burial sites show how new places of grief get new place meanings as well. In the current pluralistic society, there is a higher diversity in places of grief (Maddrell, 2011). At least three developments explain the increased diversity of places of grief (Maddrell, 2011; Venbrux et al., 2008). Maddrell (2011) and Venbrux et al. (2008) suggests that secularization has been an influential factor in the creation of new places of grief. Where traditionally it was expected one would go to a cemetery carrying the Christian values, the process of secularization led to more options in regard to burial or cremation. Also, the increasing mobility in the Netherlands and the influence new migrants inspired the Dutch funeral branch to respond with diverse places of grief (Venbrux et al., 2008). Steadily, a funeral undertaker got an increasing role in assisting to create a personalized funeral or a Do-it-yourself funeral (Venbrux et al., 2008). One of the consequences of the new diversity in places of grief was an increase in choices in the funeral branch (Maddrell, 2011). The customer choices increased in the funeral branch as a response to new demands. Now that an increasing importance was put on a personal funeral, the funeral branch had the mission to create the facilities in terms of places and products to meet the new demands (Venbrux et al., 2008). The personal funeral leads to new burial places, which responded to the need to express new forms of identities (Maddrell, 2011). So one of the main consequences of secularization for the funeral industry has been the increasingly personal funeral and authority over one's own funeral (Venbrux et al., 2008). With the new choices that can be made to create a personal funeral, there are increased options to produce and reproduce personal identities. One of the results is a higher diversity of burial places (Maddrell, 2011). The natural burial sites are one outcome of the new burial innovations (Klaassens & Groote, 2010). A natural burial site is a one of the first types of cemeteries that reflects an environmental perspective on death rather than a faith-based perspective (Maddrell, 2011).

2.4.1. Making places from space

There is a difference between space and place (Cresswell, 2004). We navigate in space, but parts of those spaces are defined as places. Tuan (1977, p. 6) formulated the difference between space and place as follows: *'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value'*. The values we attach to parts of space determine how we make a place. Place meanings are the values we attach to spaces in order to become places (Stedman, 2002).

Previous research on place meanings has demonstrated that knowing the place meanings can contribute to understanding why people respond to a place the way they respond (Lai & Lyons, 2011; Stedman, 2002). Also, knowing place meanings can explain why people behave in a place the way they do (Relph, 1976; Stedman, 2002). And in specific for natural burial, the place meanings are one of the factors that determine why one wants to be buried in a specific location. Yarwood et al. (2015) interviews with managers of natural burial sites demonstrated that those who are appealed to natural burial often feel a connection with the place. For example when the site was near a prior residence, frequently visited during the holidays or because of family connections. The natural burial sites offered the choice to be buried in a place and setting that held meaning for those involved (Yarwood et al., 2015).

2.4.2. The construction of place meanings

People give meaning to places of death, such as natural burial sites. A natural burial site is more than simply a part of nature, a natural burial site is a place where people experience emotions associated with the difference between life and death (Maddrell, 2016). The place gets meaning for the people who construct a meaning at the site. The construction of place meaning is a process between the human subject and the object of a place (Soica, 2016). In order to form place meanings, three human abilities are functioning as the building blocks of these meanings: the cognitive, the experiential and the psychological ability (Terkenli, 2005).

The cognitive ability relates to how information about the world influences how the world is interpreted to form place meanings (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001; Terkenli, 2005). Maddrell & Sidaway (2010, p. 3) have mentioned several factors that are important in the construction of meanings with the cognitive ability: *your personal events, experiences and relationships, as well as wider historical, cultural and political associations, meld to give individuals a sense of 'place'. The sense of place may be positive or negative.'* The quote illustrates that the production of meaning is highly related to who you are as a person and how you interpret the world around you based on the knowledge you have (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). The psychological ability constructs meaning by the emotions we feel when we are in a place and the connection we feel towards a place (Terkenli, 2005; Maddrell, 2016). The experiential ability relates to the interaction between a person and the world because the interaction is mediated by the senses (Holloway & Hubbard, 2011). The senses are smell, touch, sight, hearing and taste. In the construction of place meaning the senses play the role of mediators between how we experience a place and the meanings we then construct of the place (Holloway & Hubbard, 2011).

Place meanings are thus constructed in a process between a person and their surroundings. The three abilities are a mediator to give meanings to place. Place

meanings are constructed individually and everybody gives meaning to a place in a unique way (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010).

The conceptual model in figure 3 shows that place meanings can be separated into three different dimensions: the physical characteristics of the place, the experience of place and the social interactions in the place. Kulczycki (2014) developed the model based on empirical findings of place meanings in the context of outdoor rock-climbing. The model of Kulczycki (2014) forms the basis for the research on place meanings on natural burial sites because the model recognizes the multiple ways in which place meanings are constructed. In the context of natural burial sites, the hypothesis is that place meanings on natural burial sites can also be categorized according to three dimensions presented in the model.

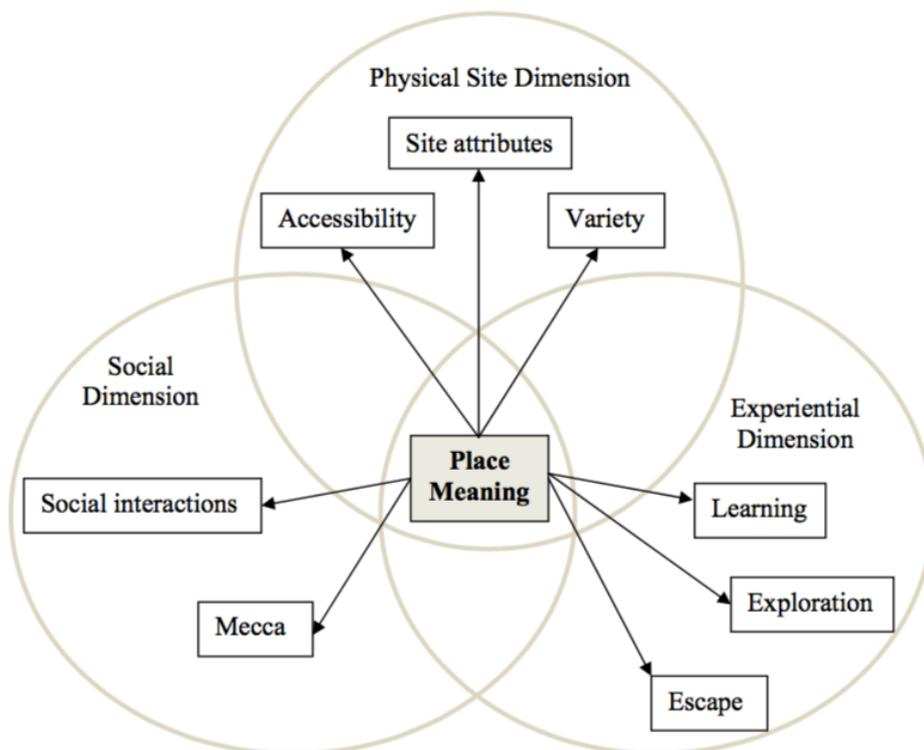


Figure 3: Conceptual Model (After: Kulczycki, 2014)

Chapter 3: Natural burial site Hillig Meer

Natural burial site Hillig Meer is part of the estate called 'Heidehof'. The estate is located in the province of Drenthe, in the village of Eext. The estate Heidehof was established in 1929 and is since 1996 property of the current owners Annetje and Dolf (Landgoed Heidehof, 2018). They have developed the natural burial site on the estate, inspired by the prehistoric burial mounds and other historic signs that indicated that the terrain was previously used for burial. The natural burial site was started in an attempt to restore the function of burial on the terrain and to combine the natural burial site as part of their wider mission for the estate Heidehof. Their mission statements are to reintegrate human-nature relationships, to enhance the quality of nature, and to increase the societal and political appreciation for nature (Landgoed Heidehof, 2018). Natural burial site Hillig Meer is part of the estate. The natural burial site is the most spacious one of the Netherlands with a surface of 33 hectares (Natuurbegraafplaats Hillig Meer, 2018). At the burial site, diverse types of nature can be found. There is the older forest of approximately 100 years old, which are the parts coloured dark green in figure 5, as well as a younger forest which is coloured light green. At the centre is a lake, which is called Hillig Meer. The lake on the natural burial site is a pingo. A pingo is a remainder of the latest glacial period in the province of Drenthe. The management aim of the terrain is to create a landscape with a high diversity.



Figure 4: Impression Hillig Meer. From left to right: place for outdoor ceremonies, a memorial tree trunk with inscriptions, the lane of the burial site, the reception (Hillig Meer, 2018).

The natural burial site is everyday open from sunup until sundown. Hillig Meer only functions as the natural burial site and as a location where a ceremony can be held. A funeral undertaker or the relatives themselves can arrange the funeral. There are two locations where ceremonies can be held on Hillig Meer. There are the inside auditorium and the outside chapel where ceremonies can be held (See figure 4). Since a burial on Hillig Meer requires specific knowledge in comparison with a traditional burial, funeral organizations which are familiar with burying on natural burial sites are recommended

on the website (Natuurbegraafplaats Hillig Meer, 2018). One example of the specific knowledge is that all the materials used for the burial such as the clothing and the coffins have to be degradable. Hillig Meer has the aim to give relatives the freedom they need to have a personalized funeral.

At the entrance of the terrain, there is a reception and an information centre (Number one and two in figure 5). At the centre, the staffs are present to help out and to answer questions. The staff members are active in creating a community. Hillig Meer builds the community in multiple ways. Every quarter a newsletter is sent to subscribers. In the newsletter, the organized activities are announced to the members. Examples of activities are a remembrance day, an informative talk about topics related to mourning or concerts outside. Also, the newsletter provides the reader with information on the vegetation and the animals present on the terrain. In addition to that, volunteers are active to participate in the maintenance of Hillig Meer and at the ceremonies. Hillig Meer aims to create a community in which experiences can be shared.

The graves at the natural burial site are everlasting. Hillig Meer has restrictions in regard to memorialization. At the site, gravestones are not allowed. Before the 1st of June 2017 boulders from Drenthe was an option, but since then only a tree disc with inscription is allowed on the terrain (Natuurbegraafplaats Hillig Meer, 2018). Hillig Meer decided to change the policy because the natural burial site considered the increase in boulders as a threat to the character of the landscape over time. Flowers can be placed in the first two weeks after the funeral. Thereafter, nature has to take care of the grave and any interference with the grave is discouraged.

Plattegrond Natuurbegraafplaats Hillig Meer

u bent zeven dagen in de week van zonsopgang tot zonsondergang
welkom op Natuurbegraafplaats Hillig Meer om te wandelen en van
de omgeving te genieten.

- ① ontvangsthuis en informatiecentrum
- ② parkeren
- ③ boskapel
- ④ rituele plantentuin
- ⑤ grafheuvels
- ⑥ belvédère
- geen graven mogelijk
- kinderbegraafplaats
- struiken
- jong bos
- oud bos
- banken



Hillig Meer
natuurbegraafplaats



Figure 5: Map of Hillig Meer (Source: Hillig Meer, 2017).

Chapter 4: Methods

4.1 Research process

The most appropriate research methods had to be selected in order to answer the research question: *'Which place meanings are ascribed to a natural burial site by people who choose natural burial or by relatives?'* In regard to the spectrum of research methods available, the methods can be divided into both qualitative and quantitative methods (Hay et al., 2016). In figure 6, Hay (2016) et al. presents the dualisms identified between qualitative and quantitative methods. In the table Hay et al. (2016) mention how qualitative research methods are suitable for searching for meaning, whereas quantitative methods are more appropriate for the identification of behaviour. The research question aims to identify the place meanings of a natural burial site, so that is why the choice for qualitative research methods was made.

Dualisms Identified between Qualitative and Quantitative Methods	
Qualitative methods	Quantitative methods
Natural settings	Experimental settings
Search for meaning	Identification of behaviour

Figure 6: Dualisms (After: Mostyn (1985) and Hammersley (1992))

In regard to the qualitative research methods available, semi-structured interviews have been conducted. The reason why semi-structured interviews were held is because these types of interviews are characterized by an informal tone (Longhurst, 2010). The informal character of semi-structured interviews was beneficial to keep the conversation open and to give the respondents the possibility to expand on their personal experiences. The semi-structured interviews give the researcher access to the respondent their feelings, experiences or values towards a research topic (Hay et al., 2016).

As a researcher access to the experiences of the respondents is gained. These experiences have to be interpreted in order to grasp the themes in the place meanings of the respondents. Kruger and Jakes (2003), as well as Wynveen et al. (2012), have argued that interpretive methods are appropriate for inquiries about place meanings. They motivate their choice for interpretive methods by arguing that the method seeks to understand meanings of a person through the understanding of how a person interacts with the environment (Kulczycki, 2014).

In regard to the analysis of the data, a code tree is created in order to interpret the interviews. The code tree and the definitions of the codes can be found in Appendix III. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All the interview transcriptions were imported into Atlas.ti. This is a computer program to analyse qualitative data (Hay et al., 2016). In Atlas.ti I did the coding of the transcriptions. During the coding, it was tested if the three dimensions of the conceptual model were present in the dataset. Also, the text that differs from the conceptual model was coded and analysed to look for other themes that might occur during the data analysis.

4.2 The case study

The place meanings of the respondents were researched on natural burial ground Hillig Meer in Eext. Gerring (2004, p. 342) has defined a case study as: '*an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units*'. The choice for a case study was made because case studies can be used to research a phenomenon and to explore in-depth nuances of a phenomenon (Hay et al., 2016). The choice was made for one case study of Hillig Meer in Drenthe. In the Netherlands, there are currently fifteen natural burial sites (See figure 2). As a criterion for the case study, the natural burial site has to be in the model of Wille (2004) on the 'nature' side of the axis (See figure 1). The 'nature' side of the axis implies that on the natural burial ground chosen as a case study, there should be no markings allowed on the site. Based on the criterion, the natural burial site Hillig Meer in Drenthe and the natural burial site Baest in Limburg were two options. A reason to choose for Hillig Meer is that it is the natural burial ground which covers the largest surface. Since the terrain is wide, there are different types of nature: open fields, young forest and older forest. That made the natural burial site a unique case study for the research project. Also, the natural burial site was willing to include an article about the research project in their newsletter. The publication was an opportunity to get in touch with persons who like to share their stories. The mediation of Hillig Meer was useful to establish relationships with potential participants. So although there are multiple natural burial sites to do the research, Hillig Meer is chosen because no grave markings are allowed.

4.3 The interviews

Twelve semi-structured interviews were held. The interviews were held once per person. A total number of twenty-four persons were interested to participate and replied to the call in the newsletter of Hillig Meer. In the contact with potential respondents, two criteria were important to estimate if the respondent could participate in the research. A first criterion was if someone had the intention to be buried on a natural burial site or is a relative. Local residents were for example not involved in the research, because the research focus is on place meanings for people who reserved a grave and for relatives. A second criterion was if a respondent was able to meet me in person. A personal interview was preferred because a personal interview is a comfortable setting to ask personal questions. A third criterion was if the participant allowed me to audio record the interviews. The recording was important to analyse the interviews and to transcribe what the respondents said. Without the audio recording, the interpretation of the interviews would be very difficult. Taking into account these criteria, all the 24 persons who replied could participate in the research. However, a selection was made since the research project is conducted in limited time. The main consideration was to interview relatives as well as people who bought a grave. In both groups, the participants were chosen randomly.

When the number of 14 respondents was reached, both relatives and people who intend to buy a grave were included in the research. Also geographically, the respondents came from different provinces in the Netherlands. At approximately the tenth interview, the themes that were discussed during the interviews started to show similarities, with respect to the individual stories of the respondents. It was an indication that the interviews covered most of the perspectives on the research topic. That is why at a number of 12 interviews the search for new respondents was discontinued.

The respondents come from five different provinces, but a majority from the province of Drenthe where Hillig Meer is located. Table 1 gives an overview of the respondents who participated in the research. The word 'position' in the second column implies how the respondents are related to the natural burial site. Reservation means that a respondent intends to buy or already bought a grave at the site. The position as relative implies that the site is a place to mourn for the respondent. All of the names in the table are fictional.

Respondent	Position
Henry (M)	Reservation
Bert (M), Hilda (F)	Reservation
Hetty (F)	Reservation
Elly (F)	Reservation
Matilda (F)	Reservation
Hendrik (M)	Relative Reservation
Geeske (F)	Relative Reservation
Francisca (F)	Reservation
Peter (M), Petra, (F)	Reservation
Julia (F)	Relative Reservation
Rob (M)	Reservation
Jopie (F)	Relative Reservation

During the interview, an interview guide was followed with seven questions (The full interview guide can be found in the Appendix). The topics discussed were:

- How the burial site is experienced as a place.
- Whether the location or the landscape quality was most important in the decision for the natural burial site Hillig Meer, Eext.
- The place meanings respondents give to traditional burial grounds.

Also, an association test was included in which the respondents were asked to mention the first four words which come to mind when they thought about the natural burial site. The association test served as a tool to check which place meanings come first to mind. Furthermore, the question was used to start the interview with, because the answers provided an option to elaborate on and structure the interview.

According to the structure of the interview guide, the semi-structured interviews were carried out. Participants had purposefully no previous insights into the interview guide. The reason why is because of the association question, in which the participant is asked to give the first words which come to mind. If the participants would see the interview guide beforehand, they could prepare for the question. In regard to the location, the interviews took place mostly at respondents their home. Also, two interviews were held at Hillig Meer and two interviews in a café. The private sphere of the home and Hillig Meer turned out to be most comfortable for the interviews. The interviews were held individually. Besides the researcher and respondents, no other persons were present at the interviews.

Two types of interview guides were used: interview guides with approximately the same questions, but adapted to whether the interview was with someone who reserved a place at the natural burial site or whether the person was a relative. In regard to the method, the type of interview is the same. But from the transcripts, the interviews are considerably different. People who reserved a grave construct place meanings because of arguments why they make a certain choice as a customer. If the site is visited as a place to mourn, the place meanings are expressed with emotions. One indicator for the difference between the types of respondents was the length of the interviews. The interviews with relatives tended to be longer, in comparison with the interviews with people who reserved a grave. Also, the place meanings from relatives were expressed as a narrative from the past to the now, whereas the place meanings of people who choose natural burial were supported with arguments for their decision.

4.4 Ethics and positionality

The main dilemma in the research was: how to approach the respondents. Talking about death is a private subject and it was challenging to find respondents who are willing to be open on the topic. The call in the newsletter provided a solution here because the respondents deliberately made the choice to participate. The chosen method to approach the respondents had as an advantage that the participants interested were willing to be open about the topic. A disadvantage of the method is that there is a chance that mostly people who have formulated strong place meanings towards the natural burial site participated because they deliberately made the choice to approach me.

In the contact with the respondents, I tried to be transparent and open. Before we did the interview, I asked them on the telephone if they were okay with the interview being recorded. Also, I made sure to go through the informed consent form together, before starting the actual interview. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix I. I highly appreciate the respondents their interest in the topic and throughout the research process, I aim to treat them with respect.

In regard to positionality, the interviews were both held and interpreted by the author Charlotte Delicaat. As a researcher, I was part of the interpretive research process (Angen, 2000). Therefore a bit of background information of the researcher is relevant. Currently, I am a master student Cultural Geography. I have some work experience in the funeral branch, where I had a student job as a hostess previously to starting the research. The work experiences inspired me to do the research on natural burial and assisted me in terms of knowledge of terminology and the background of burial practices. I had no established relationships with the organization or the respondents previously to starting the research project. Also, at the time I started the research project I had resigned from the hostess job.

Chapter 5: Results

In the model by Kulczycki (2014), place meanings are constructed in three dimensions: the physical characteristics of place, social interactions in place and the experience of place. These three dimensions are represented in the triangle of figure 7.

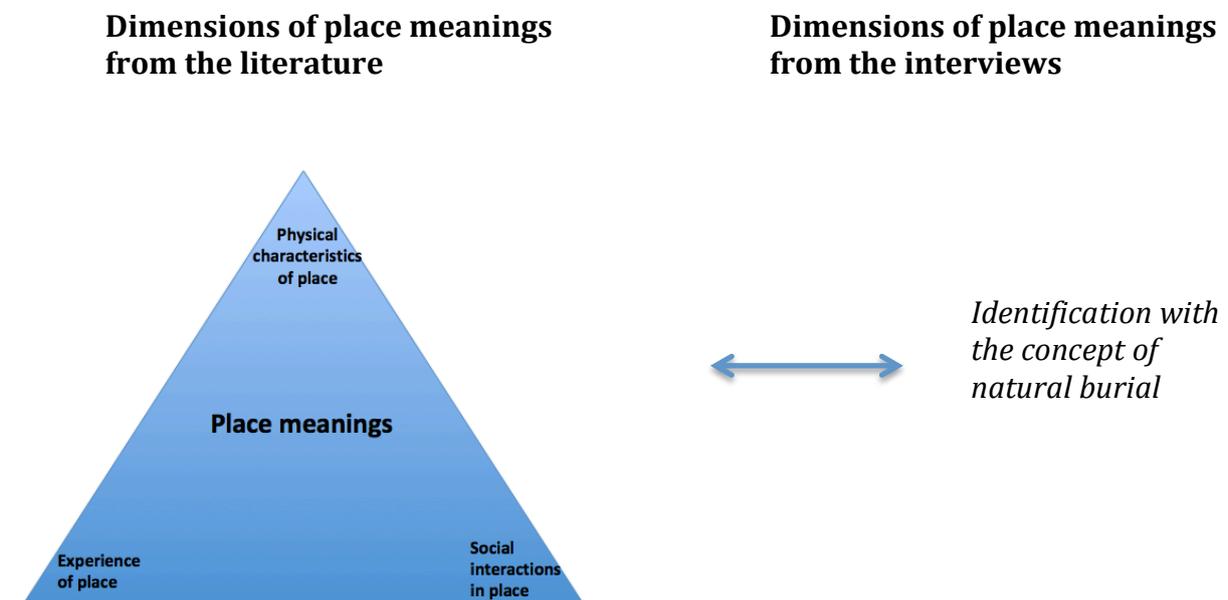


Figure 7: Conceptual model on the dimensions of place meanings

The analysis of the interviews shows that place meanings are indeed constructed within these three dimensions, but that one extra dimension has to be added; an identification with the ideology behind natural burial.

5.1 Natural burial movement

In the interviews, the respondents were asked why they opted for natural burial instead of traditional burial. The answers reveal a process of identification with the concept of natural burial. An illustration is this quote by Hendrik:

"I am very satisfied with natural burial site Hillig Meer. One of the reasons why I am so satisfied is because the site is still a real natural burial site. When I visited another natural burial site recently, I was startled a bit. I saw a traditional burial site in a natural environment, with all kinds of memorial monuments."

The quote of Hendrik illustrates that he is satisfied with Hillig Meer because it is a 'real' natural burial site. The word 'real' in this context suggests that the natural burial site is managed in accordance with what he considers the concept of natural burial. Clayden et al. (2015) describe the concept of natural burial as a combination of a woodland cemetery with specific management principles. This combination is considered natural burial in the way it has developed itself as the 'natural burial movement' in Britain (Clayden et al., 2015). In the quote of Hendrik he refers to this concept of natural burial. Although natural burial sites are implemented in a variety of ways, the natural burial

site Hillig Meer has as a specific aim to manage the site in accordance with the British style of natural burial (Hillig Meer, 2014).

In regard to the identification with the natural burial movement, there is a difference between relatives and people who reserve a grave. For the people who reserve a grave at Hillig Meer the choice for natural burial is a considered choice, in which there is information available about natural burial and the implications of natural burial. The respondents make their choices regarding natural burial individually. Hetty said:

"A choice for natural burial was really my own choice. I send a picture to my relatives and said: this is the place I reserved at Hillig Meer."

The statement supports that new choices regarding a funeral are increasingly individualized and personal (Wouters, 2002). The balance between the wishes and needs of the individual and the social expectations is nowadays more on the side of the personal funeral and the individual (Wouters, 2002). In regard to how relatives construct place meanings, this implies that the extent to which the relatives are familiar with the implications of natural burial differs. Especially, the need to personalize the grave, for example by putting flowers, can be difficult for relatives to deal with. Jopie mentioned as a place meaning in the association test: *'getting accustomed to natural burial'*.

She illustrated that it took her time to get used to the implications of natural burial.

"I had to resist myself to interfere with the grave in the beginning. But at a certain moment, you get used to natural burial and you feel more at ease. The grave is constantly taken care of by nature and I do not have to worry about how it looks."

Jopie first had to get used to natural burial and now she feels like she is used to it. Thus, the identification with natural burial differs between relatives and people who reserved a grave.

5.2 Provide an alternative

Clayden et al. (2015) mention that many natural burial providers in Britain consider themselves as a group reclaiming the control over the established funeral directors (p. 196). Natural burial is considered as an alternative to the traditional funeral branch there (Yarwood et al., 2015). In the Dutch context, Molenaar et al. (2009) mention how traditional cemeteries generally already provide a way to be buried in a sober or environmentally friendly way. Still, natural burial sites are valued as an alternative to traditional cemeteries because they react to a demand to 'return to nature' (Molenaar et al., 2009). The interviews reflect the alternative character of a natural burial site because many respondents called the place 'special', 'sophisticated' and 'unique'. Jopie said:

"The place is very special to me, you are buried in a unique way in a unique place."

The perceived uniqueness of the place is one of the reasons why respondents choose for a natural burial site, although from an environmental viewpoint both traditional and

natural burial sites offer environmentally friendly options (Molenaar et al., 2009). Klaassens & Groote (2011) report similarly that in the decision making of people who choose natural burial, the natural environment of the burial place appears to be more important than the desire for only an ecological alternative. Also, Clayden et al. (2015) found in their data that a 'nicer place' to be buried was more important in the decision-making than environmental concerns. The experiences in the interviews suggest that the natural burial site is regarded as an alternative to traditional burial to the extent that it provides a natural environment to be buried in.

Another recurring theme regarding the position of a natural burial site towards traditional burial sites was the experience of a visit. In the interviews, the respondents indicated that they visit traditional cemeteries sometimes, as a relative or as a visitor, and considered traditional cemeteries historically and culturally significant places. Bert and Hilda said:

"This might sound contradictory, but we do sometimes visit cemeteries out of interest, for example when we are travelling. We like to take a look at the cemeteries and the older gravestones, to have a look at their meanings. But still, we choose natural burial, because that is even better."

Bert and Hilda explain how they are interested in traditional cemeteries and visit the sites out of interest. But still, when it concerns their own choices they want to choose for natural burial, where no such signs as gravestones are allowed. The primary focus of a natural burial site is centred on the experience of the nature area, rather than an individual grave (Rumble, 2010).

Remarkable is that the interviews show that respondents generally took natural burial or cremation into consideration, rather than comparing natural burial to traditional burial. Hetty illustrated her experience as follows:

"In the first instance, I chose for cremation, because then you are the least of a burden for the earth. But taking the polluting smoke emission of crematoria into consideration, I thought: if you close crematoria, that is much environmental friendlier. With burial, no extra step is needed. So I chose for natural burial because the maintenance of burial places needs resources from the earth as well."

Respondents who share a non-religious background generally indicated that cremation or natural burial were the two considered options. That supports the research by Berridge (2001) who has argued in the British context that cremation and natural burial have the same motivations in regard to the solutions they provide towards bodily disposal (Rumble, 2010). The main overlap between cremation and natural burial is that the movements are grounded on secular arguments with the aim to improve the environment (Rumble, 2010). The natural burial sites are thus an alternative to traditional burial, but share its origins rather with cremation.

In regard to the motivations for natural burial, another consideration mentioned in the interviews was the increased complexity of relationships and networks nowadays. Natural burial sites offer a solution to dilemmas in who wants to remember where and with whom. The experience of having a nature area to be able to remember and walk provides a context in which there is no memorial stone, but a comforting place to get

together. There are examples of situations, such as reconstituted families or children who live abroad or in different places throughout the Netherlands, for who the choice for natural burial solves these dilemmas. Peter and Petra say for example:

"We have children living throughout the Netherlands. There is no obligation for the children to take care of the grave. When they want to visit us, they know where to look and when they cannot visit they are free to find another way to remember us."

The respondents draw on their personal experiences when they mention that the natural burial site was a choice to give their relatives more freedom in how they want to remember.

These factors represent how respondents have given meanings to natural burial sites and provide a context for the position of natural burial in regard to other places to remember in the Netherlands.

5.3 Everlasting peace

In the Netherlands, it is common to buy a grave for a definite time, often 20 years (Van der Putten, 2017). Since graves are cleared afterwards, the possibility to buy an everlasting grave is rare (Klaassens & Groote, 2011; Van der Putten 2017). The natural burial site Hillig Meer is one of the options for an everlasting grave. Natural burial sites thus provide a distinctive characteristic, which makes it attractive to people who desire an everlasting grave.

In the interviews, the everlasting characteristics translated in the place meaning 'everlasting peace'. The meaning of everlasting is twofold. The graves are everlasting, but nature is seen as an everlasting force. Elly said:

"The place is to find everlasting peace. Just a place, interrupted by nobody and surrounded by nature."

And Geeske:

"On the burial site Hillig Meer I do not experience the separation I feel at a traditional cemetery."

The respondents found peace in the idea that the grave was everlasting. The people who reserved a grave were relieved because their relatives do not have to make any further decisions about the grave. They felt like they had everything arranged now. Relatives felt relieved that the future was one without difficult decisions about the grave. Both relatives, as well as people who reserved a grave, indicated that the 'everlasting peace' played a role in the place meanings constructed on the natural burial site. For example Julia, whose husband is buried in Hillig Meer. She illustrated how her husband used to make fun of the term 'final resting place' when he was at a funeral in the Netherlands:

"And when we had a funeral, you heard someone say: we bring the person to a final resting place. My husband used to say: how ironic, it's nothing like a final resting place, in 10 years someone else might be buried here."

Julia expressed how the idea of having a final resting place was comforting them and how she felt relieved to know that, with the choice for natural burial, she had an everlasting place.

Also, Francisca and Rob mentioned the importance of really having a final resting place. Rob answered why he chose for natural burial:

"Very important and perhaps the most important reason for me to choose for natural burial in Eext is that the graves are everlasting."

Rob as well as Julia have religious views on the world and therefore want to choose for burial. In their place meanings towards natural burial site Hillig Meer they explain that the place is both a consecrated ground in combination with an everlasting grave. The everlasting grave was for them an essential aspect to choose for a natural burial site. The everlasting character on the natural burial site Hillig Meer is a distinctive place meaning.

5.4 Role of a natural environment

Nature has multiple roles in constructing the place meanings towards the natural burial site. The place meanings of nature are constructed by how nature is perceived by the respondents. For example, there are different types of nature on the terrain. Francisca said she really wanted to be buried near a pine tree, because it reminded her of Christmas. For Francisca the pine tree has the meaning of Christmas because she constructed that meaning based on her memories of Christmas days. The example illustrates how nature is socially constructed because different people attach different meanings to nature (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). On natural burial sites, place meanings are constructed which are in essence environmentally based (Maddrell, 2011).

One often mentioned place meaning is: 'to come from nature and to go back to nature'. At the natural burial site, an atmosphere is created in which respondents feel they can return to nature. The respondents put the question what returning to nature exactly means in perspective. Rob notes that on a traditional cemetery you return to nature, but on a natural burial site it is different because the natural environment is experienced as well:

"You return to nature on a natural burial site. Wherever you get buried you become part of nature again, but the atmosphere here is much more natural. On a natural burial site, the view is much more natural."

The respondents really experience that they return to nature at the burial site, because of the natural environment. Matilda mentions her wish is silence:

"There is something funny: already 30 years I desire silence, but now at the burial site I chose there is 24/7 car noise from the adjacent road. So that puts my desire into perspective."

The two illustrations show how respondents attach the place meaning 'to return to nature' to the burial site. Rob and Matilda realize there are restrictions to the extent to which it is actually possible: the car noise and the observation that a person always

returns to nature in the examples mentioned. So although there are restrictions, the natural burial site is experienced as a place to return to nature. Since nature is socially constructed it is different for everyone what returning to nature actually means.

In regard to nature and the interactions at the natural burial site, walking is an often-mentioned ritual. From the perspective of the relatives, the importance of walking adds to the process of acceptance and to walk the feeling of returning to nature. The relatives mention about the rituals they perform on the burial site and that they often walk on the terrain of the natural burial site. With walking they connect to the natural environment itself and to the specific place. Jopie says about her rituals:

"The visit of a grave overflows into a long walk in the area."

Walking is for her an activity that stimulates her to deal with the emotions during a visit on the natural burial site. She continues:

"Mourning is important, but you also have to experience the here and the now. Nature helps me to connect to the moment. Nature asks me to be mindful of my surroundings, for example, to notice the flowers."

The role of walking is valued in the place meanings as making a connection between remembering and the present moment. Walking and nature are soothing factors in coping with the emotions that come up during a visit. The natural environment has the effect of helping with the emotions that come up at the natural burial site.

Conclusion

The interviews show that for natural burial a fourth factor has to be added to the conceptual model: a process of identification with the concept of natural burial. In addition to the three expected factors: how a place looks, the experience of a place and the interactions in place.

The identification forms the place meanings for both people who choose for natural burial and for relatives. A natural burial site is more than only the natural burial site itself, but also part of the concept 'natural burial' which is both a place and a management concept. For the place meanings, this implies that people identify themselves with the concept of natural burial, which extends beyond merely the physical site. In the identification, there is a difference between how relatives and people who choose natural burial give meaning to the place. For those who intend to be buried on Hillig Meer there is a choice, but relatives sometimes have or sometimes haven't had an influence on the choice for natural burial.

The interviews reveal that a choice for natural burial site has distinctive motivations in comparison to traditional burial. Natural burial sites are an alternative to traditional cemeteries to the extent that it is different from traditional burial, one of the reasons why respondents call the place unique. In the origins of the movement, motivations for natural burial have more overlap with motivations for cremation. In addition to that, a natural burial site provides solutions to nowadays situations in how people are related and where they live.

One of the most recurring place meanings towards the natural burial site is everlasting peace. The everlasting peace is twofold: the graves are everlasting and nature is seen as an everlasting force. A common aspect of place meanings on natural burial sites is that they are essentially based on environmental values. Sustainability is part of the environmental values, but to a lesser extent decisive in the choice for natural burial than the environmental qualities of the landscape.

The natural environment forms the place meaning '*To come from nature and to return to nature*'. Respondents experience the natural burial site as a place to return to nature, because of the natural environment. In regard to interactions at the place, there is a specific role for walking as a ritual on the site. Walking connects to the natural environment and is a way to deal with the emotions during a visit.

That answers the following research question: *Which place meanings are ascribed to a natural burial site by people who choose natural burial or by relatives?*

The stories of the interviewees have shown how relatives and people who have reserved a grave give meaning to a natural burial site. The stories show the diversity of needs people have in regard to how, when and where remembrance takes place. These wishes vary over time and vary in place. A recommendation for future research is to examine in greater depth which changing needs on the side of the bereaved can explain the current interest in natural burial. Natural burial sites are relatively new places in the Netherlands, which provide a new option for interviewed persons. Another recommendation is to extend this research to specify more detailed how the identification process takes place.

Acknowledgement

By writing this acknowledgement, I finalize my thesis that I started in autumn 2017. The process of writing taught me a lot on a scientific and personal level. From the beginning onwards I had very good support, for which I am very grateful. I want to acknowledge the help I received during the thesis process.

When I visited an information event about burial, I met the staff and volunteers of natural burial site Hillig Meer. It was a very pleasant contact and they offered me to post an article about my research in the newsletter. Within a few days, I had an overwhelming number of reactions and interest in the research. So I want to thank everyone who approached me to share his or her story and for the interest in the research project. Also, I want to thank the staff of Hillig Meer and the volunteers for their enthusiasm and the chances they gave me to do the research. I am amazed by the commitment and hard work of the team to take care of the natural burial site.

From the University of Groningen, I want to thank my supervisor Dr Peter D. Groot. The excellent support, shared interest in the topic and insightful comments made it a pleasure to have you as my supervisor. And I want to thank my second supervisor Dr Bettina van Hoven for her time and her interest in the thesis.

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Appendix I: Informed Consent Form

Participation

You are about to participate in my research project about place meanings on natural burial sites. I am really glad you would like to participate.

By signing the informed consent form, you know what your rights are and agree to the following:

Nickname

To guarantee the anonymity of you as a respondent, you are free to choose a preferred nickname or I can choose one for you. The nickname will be used in the research paper to illustrate your quotes of the interview.

By signing this form, you agree that the chosen nickname '.....' can be linked to your answers.

Personalia

Certain personal characteristics can be mentioned linked to the chosen nickname.

Please mind the following: if you do *not* want a specific personal characteristic processed in the research results, please write it down in the box below.

Recording of the interview

The interview will be recorded and the records will be used only for the current research project. Please notify me if you want the recording to be removed afterwards.

Right to withdraw from the research

You have the right to withdraw from the research. Withdrawal is possible up to eight months after the interview is taken.

Publication of the research

You agree to the publication of the research in the master thesis library of the University of Groningen and if applicable via other publication channels (link to the library: <http://scripties.ned.ub.rug.nl/>). Also, the natural burial organization Hillig Meer might publish the results.

If you have any questions about the informed consent form or your rights as an interviewee, please contact me. We can discuss how to proceed.

Date:

Signature of the respondent:

Place:

Signature of the researcher:

Appendix II: interviewguide

Vooraf:

- Benoemen van het informed consent form.
- Gebruik opname apparatuur.
- Mogelijkheid en/of toestemming om een foto te maken/ontvangen van gereserveerde plek.

1. Welke vier woorden komen als eerste in u op wanneer u denkt aan natuurbegraven?

Doel: Een associatievraag waarmee ik wil kijken of de betekenissen die genoemd worden overeenkomen met die uit de literatuur: natuur, begraafplaats, leven, dood. Of dat er ook nieuwe betekenissen naar voren komen.

2. Welke vier woorden komen als eerste in u op wanneer u denkt aan uw (gereserveerde) plek op de natuurbegraafplaats?

Doel: In de analyse kan ik dan kijken of er nog een onderscheid is tussen de natuurbegraafplaats in het algemeen of de eigen gereserveerde plek op de natuurbegraafplaats.

3. Kunt u de woorden ordenen met de betekenis die het meest belangrijk voor u is op plaats 1 en het minst belangrijk op 4?

Doel: Door het maken van een ranking hoop ik meer te kunnen zeggen over de waarde die wordt gehecht aan één plaatsbetekenis ten opzichte van een andere plaatsbetekenis.

4. Waarom heeft u voor een natuurbegraafplaats gekozen?

Doel: De motivatie van de respondent weten om te linken aan de plaatsbetekenis die de natuurbegraafplaats voor diegene heeft.

5. Hoe ervaart u de natuurbegraafplaats als plek? Waarom ervaart u de natuurbegraafplaats zo?

Doel: ontdekken hoe de betekenissen zich tot elkaar verhouden en welk gevoel de respondenten daarbij hebben.

6. Heeft u deze natuurbegraafplaats gekozen omdat het een natuurbegraafplaats is of vanwege de specifieke locatie?

7. Welke betekenis heeft de natuurbegraafplaats voor u in vergelijking met een 'gewone' begraafplaats?

Doel: Erachter te komen op welke manier de plaatsbetekenis voor een natuurbegraafplaats verschilt van de betekenis die aan een normale begraafplaats wordt toegekend.

Afsluiten interview: Is er nog iets wat we nog niet hebben besproken, maar u wel graag zou willen vertellen over de natuurbegraafplaats?

Appendix III: Code scheme

Code name	Code definition
Experience of place	<i>The codes in the category of 'Experience of place' denote statements made by the respondents about their personal feelings and experiences in place.</i>
Bijzonder	The natural burial site is experienced as an extraordinary place.
Eenheid	The experience is mentioned of not being separated by gates or stones.
Gevoel op de plek	Participants experience positive feelings on the site.
Ervaring	The participants say how they experience the place.
Mooi	The respondent considers the natural burial site beautiful.
Natuur als troost	The nature is considered as healing for the respondent.
Symbolische locatie	The location has a symbolic meaning to the respondent.
Terug naar de natuur	Going back to nature is the expressed experience in place.
Thuis	The respondents say to experience feelings of home in place.
Het hier en nu	The place is experienced as an interaction between mourning and focusing the attention on the present, with the mediation of nature.
Physical characteristics of the place	<i>The codes of physical characteristics denote the influence of the how the place looks like on the respondents their place meanings.</i>
Natuur	Refers to the presence of nature on the burial site.
Geen onderhoud	A grave at the burial site does not require maintenance, because maintenance is done by nature itself.
Fysieke locatie	A place to visit.
Geen grafonderhoud	No maintenance at the graves is needed.
Eeuwige grafrust	The grave is everlasting.
Duurzaamheid	The type of burial is considered most environmental friendly.
Drenthe	The province of Drenthe is appreciated.
Dieren op het terrein toegestaan	Animals are allowed on the burial sites.
Bomen	The importance of trees is mentioned.
Rol van landschap	The importance of the landscape is mentioned.
Historie	The history of Hillig Meer as a burial site is mentioned.
Social interactions in place	<i>The codes of 'Social interactions in place' denote statements made about how the social environment influences their place meanings towards the burial site.</i>
Geloof	Religion was a motivation to choose for burial.
Levensstijl	The choice for natural burial says something about your lifestyle.
Persoonlijke aandacht	The attention for who you are as a person on the natural burial site is called excellent.
Ritueel	The rituals are mentioned which are performed at the natural burial site.
Kinderen	The natural burial site is mentioned as being a place were kids could mourn as well as play in the nature.
Oorsprong	Respondents mention their background or relationship towards the area as part of their place meaning.
Afstand	Distance is mentioned in terms of travel time to the site.
Wandelen	The respondent reports about the positive influence of walking on the natural burial site.

