

4-1-1989

# Messages in Stone: Symbolism on Victorian Grave Markers

Loren N. Horton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Horton, Loren N. "Messages in Stone: Symbolism on Victorian Grave Markers." *The Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 62-72.  
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol70/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# Messages in Stone:

## *Symbolism on Victorian Grave Markers*

by Loren N. Horton  
photos by Gerald Mansheim

**A**LTHOUGH many people have studied the gloomier symbols on grave markers in eighteenth-century New England, fewer have studied the emotional, the romantic, the sentimental symbols used on grave markers during the Victorian period, when the major part of the United States was settled and developed. The symbols followed the frontier and seem remarkably similar, from Ohio and Michigan in the East to California and Oregon in the West. The settlement and development of Iowa fits almost perfectly within the Victorian period (roughly 1840–1910), making Victorian grave markers a wonderful case study of the symbols used during that exuberant time.

Although few groups in history used symbols with greater enthusiasm than the Victorians, ornamentation and decoration are basic to all cultures and historical periods. Through ornamentation the articles of everyday life are made visually pleasing, and colors and designs are used to soften the tedious work underway with the utensil or tool involved. As use of particular types of decoration or ornamentation become more traditional, they acquire common meanings, becoming part of that group's communication techniques. Because the Victorians

extended their use of symbols to grave markers, the shapes and sizes of the markers, and the ornamentation, words, or numbers placed on them, can be read as clues to the Victorians' personal or cultural taste.

Besides marking graves with elaborate grave stones, the Victorians surrounded the graves with non-functional objects. Fences, gates, benches, flowers, shrubs, trees, ponds, bridges, and urns were commonly found in cemeteries after 1831, a turning point in cemetery appearances. That year was the founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was the first so-called "rural" or "garden" cemetery, and one of the earlier uses of the word *cemetery*. A cemetery, from its Greek root, means a large dormitory where many people are sleeping. This is an entirely different concept from the earlier terms of "burying ground" or "grave yard." Mount Auburn utilized the topography so that walkways and driveways curved with the contours of the hills. (In such cemeteries the Victorians suspended their practice of placing all grave markers facing the same direction, believing that the deceased could then rise up facing east at the Second Coming of Christ.) Non-native species of trees were planted, lagoons created, shrubs and flowers introduced, and the whole atmosphere was as much like a park as a place for graves. Because parks were uncommon, people used the cemeteries for this purpose. Sunday afternoons might be spent visiting the

---

The overturned basket would have portrayed death to the Victorians. The plethora of symbols on this grave marker show many aspects of the Victorian language of symbolism. More examples appear on the following pages.

family plot in the cemetery and might include a picnic lunch or a tea at the site. Fences and gates set one plot off from another, much as the fences and gates at one's home did. Benches were for sitting on, the walkways were for strolling, and the driveways were for leisurely drives in good weather to admire the botanical specimens throughout the cemetery.

In such a context, grave markers became more ornate as different materials came into use, the technology of carving and inscribing changed, and the meaning of many symbols came to be standardized. It was literally possible to transmit a message about the deceased by what symbols were placed on the grave marker. For example, some of the Victorians' language of flowers, used for social communication, was transferred to use on grave markers. Just as a lover might send a message to his beloved in the choice of flowers in a bouquet, so might a survivor send a message to the cemetery visitor about the deceased in the choice of flowers carved on the grave marker. Likewise, in the elaborate language of leaves, oak leaves, common for a man's grave marker, symbolized strength of faith (not physical strength). Ivy symbolized steadfastness of faith; palm leaves (sometimes mistakenly portrayed as ferns) symbolized salvation of the soul. Other categories of symbols include trees, musical instruments, architectural details, household furnishings, lodge and military emblems, fruit, pagan symbols (the urn and seashell), and Christian symbols (angels, palm leaves, and the gates of heaven). Numerous biblical verses were used to support the meanings of the symbols. The following photos from midwestern cemeteries illustrate some of the major categories of symbols.

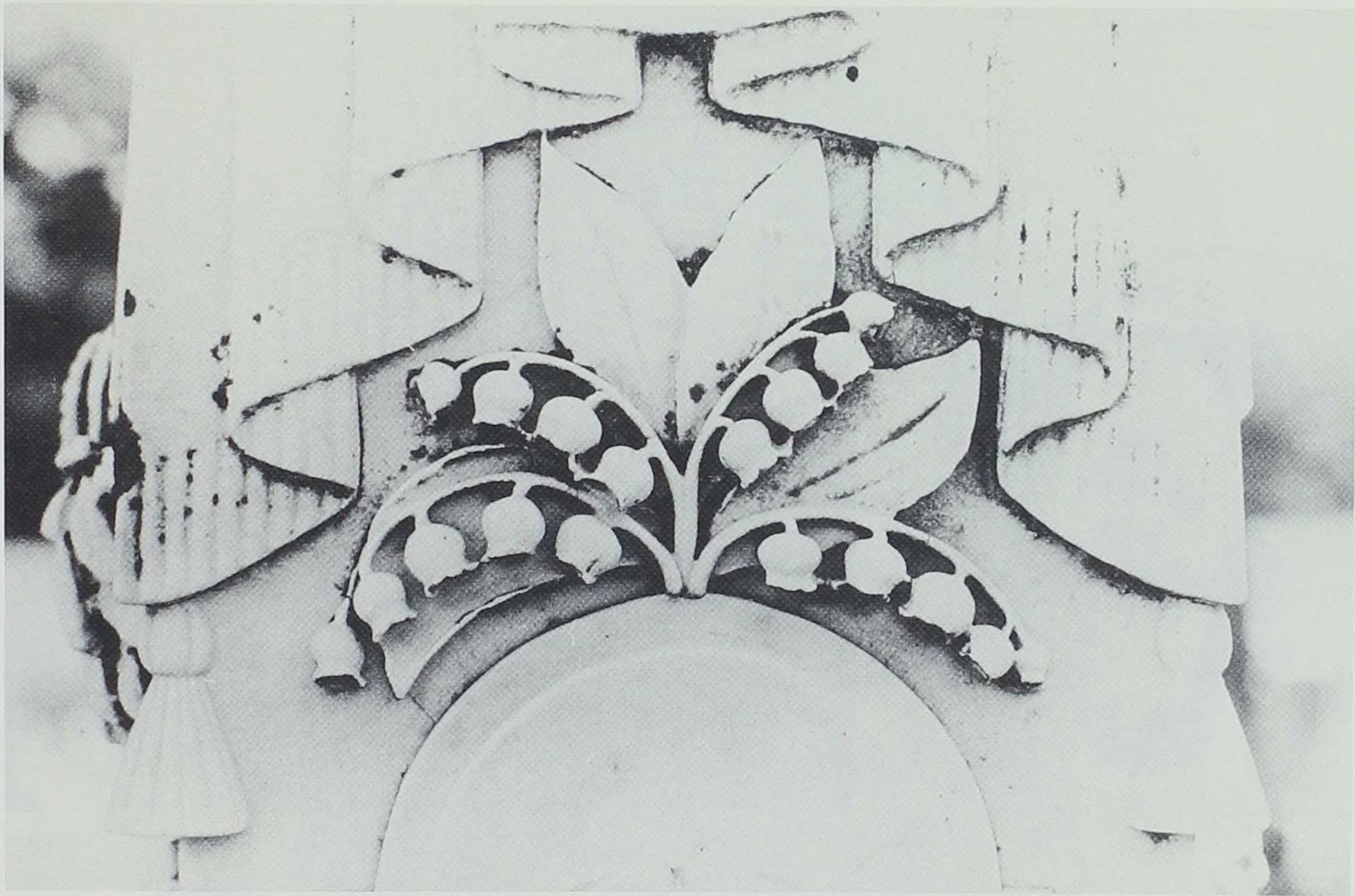
The Victorian period was a time of conspicuous spending in life and in death. Homes were large and elaborate when financial resources allowed it, interior furnishings and decorations were equally elaborate, and clothing clearly indicated wealth and social status, or the lack thereof. Because the attitude about the remains of the deceased was that they were resting or sleeping, it was thought desirable and proper to surround the resting place with familiar objects. Large and elaborate markers were covered with symbols of the

articles the deceased could have afforded and enjoyed during life. Pillows, baskets, cradles, chairs, and beds all signified the repose of the body, just as the heavenly symbols signified the repose of the soul.

Although many twentieth-century symbols are the same ones the Victorians used, they may now have different meanings or no commonly known meanings at all. Today one probably chooses a symbol because it is attractive or because one simply likes it. In the Victorian period, however, the survivors chose particular symbols, confident that their "message" would be commonly understood. This transition in the use and meaning of symbols from the nineteenth to the twentieth century is little understood. In studying Victorian grave marker symbols, we must be careful to not let our twentieth-century values and standards interfere, and to not read the symbols as fact. Although nineteenth-century guidebooks for stone carvers indicated what certain symbols meant, some people undoubtedly used certain symbols because they liked them, had a personal association with them, or were imitating their neighbors' choices. The tendency to conform was strong in the Victorian mind, particularly the middle-class mind. (Even if one were not in the middle class, one might like to behave as if one were.) Meanings of symbols discussed here are what most of the people probably thought most of the time. Nevertheless, the grave markers of the Victorians, and the symbols used on them, are vivid manifestations of the thoughts and ideas of an interesting and important historical period.

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

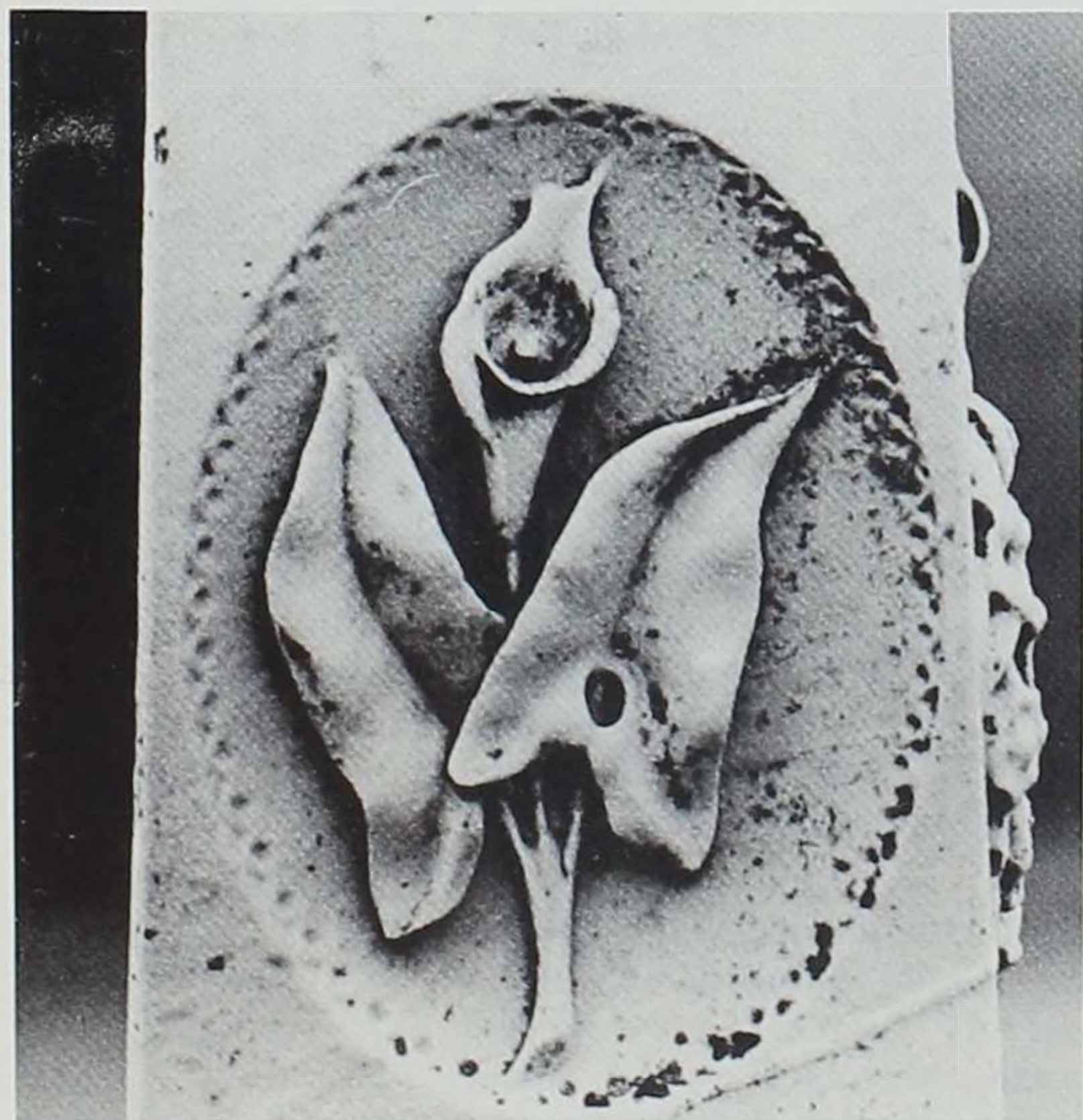
The best short account of the rural cemetery movement and the founding of Mount Auburn is Barbara Rotundo, "The Rural Cemetery Movement," *Essex Institute Historical Collection*, 109 (July 1973), 231-40. See also Thomas Bender, "The Rural Cemetery Movement: Urban Travail and the Appeal of Nature," *The New England Quarterly* 47 (June 1974), 196-211. A good account of gravestone symbolism in Iowa is found in Coleen Nutting, "Cemetery Symbolism of Prairie Pioneers: Gravestone Art and Social Change in Story County, Iowa," *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*, 31 (1984), 1-135. Another is Joan I. Unsicker, "Forgotten Images: Nineteenth Century Gravestone Motifs in Peoria County," *Western Illinois Regional Studies*, 5 (Fall 1982), 172-83. Between 1856 and 1872 Joseph B. Robinson published guide books for stone carvers with designs for grave markers, monuments, and churchyard memorials. The nineteenth-century etiquette books are also rich sources of the meanings of symbols, and other symbols used at that time.



The lily and the lily of the valley symbolize purity and innocence, and appear on the grave markers of female children and adolescents and young unmarried women. Rarely used for male children, lilies were virtually unknown for adolescent boys or young men. This perhaps suggests a Victorian attitude that girls might be pure and innocent, but boys never could be.



The rose adorned grave markers as a stylized rosette in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and became more realistic in the Victorian era and twentieth century. The rosebud with a broken stem (above), or two roses and a bud (indicating parents and child) often were used for the death of a child. A rose symbolizes love and beauty. Beauty meant the quality of the soul and the life lived, rather than physical beauty. Roses in full bloom are used for adults, often for women. A bouquet of roses magnifies the quality of a single rose.





The hand appears in several designs. A broken link in a chain (upper left) symbolizes the death of a family member. (This is not to be confused with the IOOF lodge symbol of three links.) Clasped hands may mean the eternal unity of a husband and wife; the clergy's blessing on the soul; the fellowship of a lodge; or even God's welcome to eternal life. A forefinger pointing up means that the soul has gone to heaven. A hand reaching down and forefinger pointing downwards does not mean the soul has gone to hell, but that God's hand is lifting the soul up to heaven.



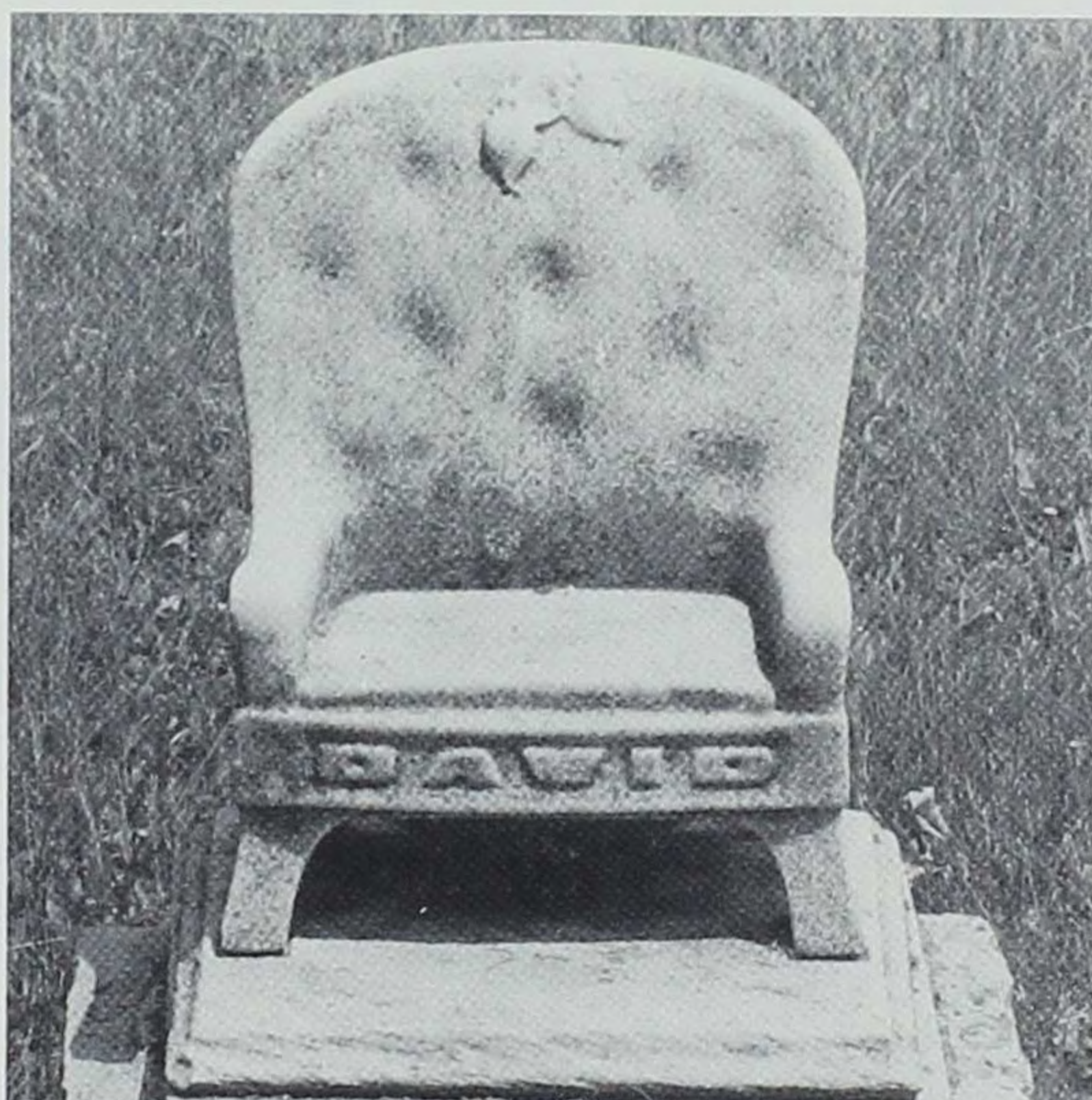
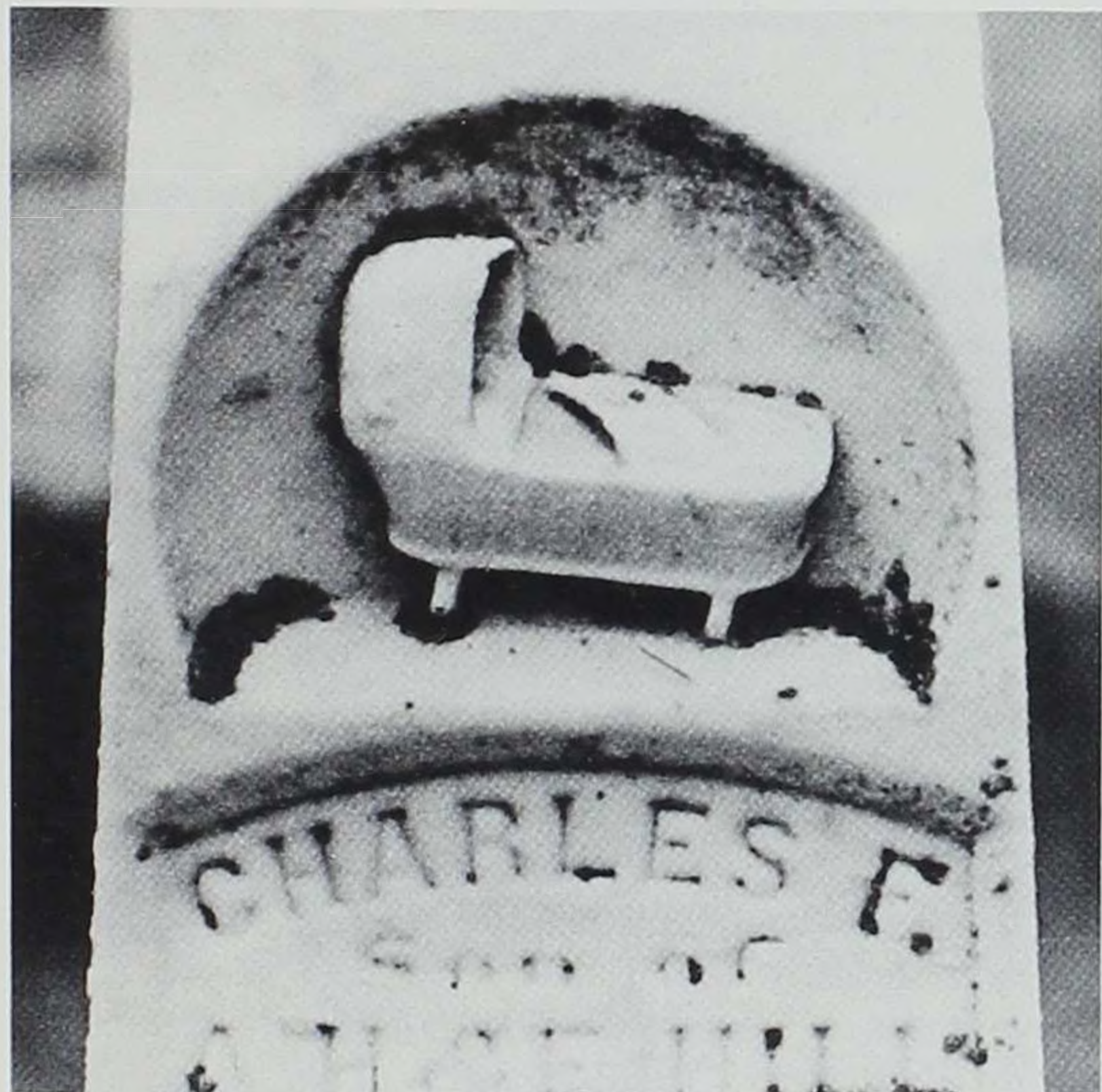
Measurements of time are less common symbols but among the most dramatic. Clocks and watches are often stopped at the hour of the death. Sun dials are also used. The hourglass is an ancient symbol of life and death. A winged hourglass has double meaning: the sands of time have run out and the soul is flying to heaven.

Just as the Victorians furnished their homes with an abundance of objects, so they carried out this same theme of "more is better" in their cemeteries. Surrounding the dead with objects reminiscent of that with which they lived was all a part of the Victorian idea of the dead only sleeping.

Any kind of drapery (sometimes on pedestals) represents an even more obvious relationship to household furniture. The folds of the draperies (right) are often carved with much detail, and the fringe and tasseled cords are all intended to make the deceased feel at home in the cemetery. The pedestal likewise acts as a piece of furniture. An object such as a Bible, a wreath, a dove, or an urn might rest on it. (Occasionally pedestals may be stylized obelisks, which is quite another concept indeed. The obelisk is an Egyptian symbol, and to the Victorians anything Egyptian was automatically associated with death.)

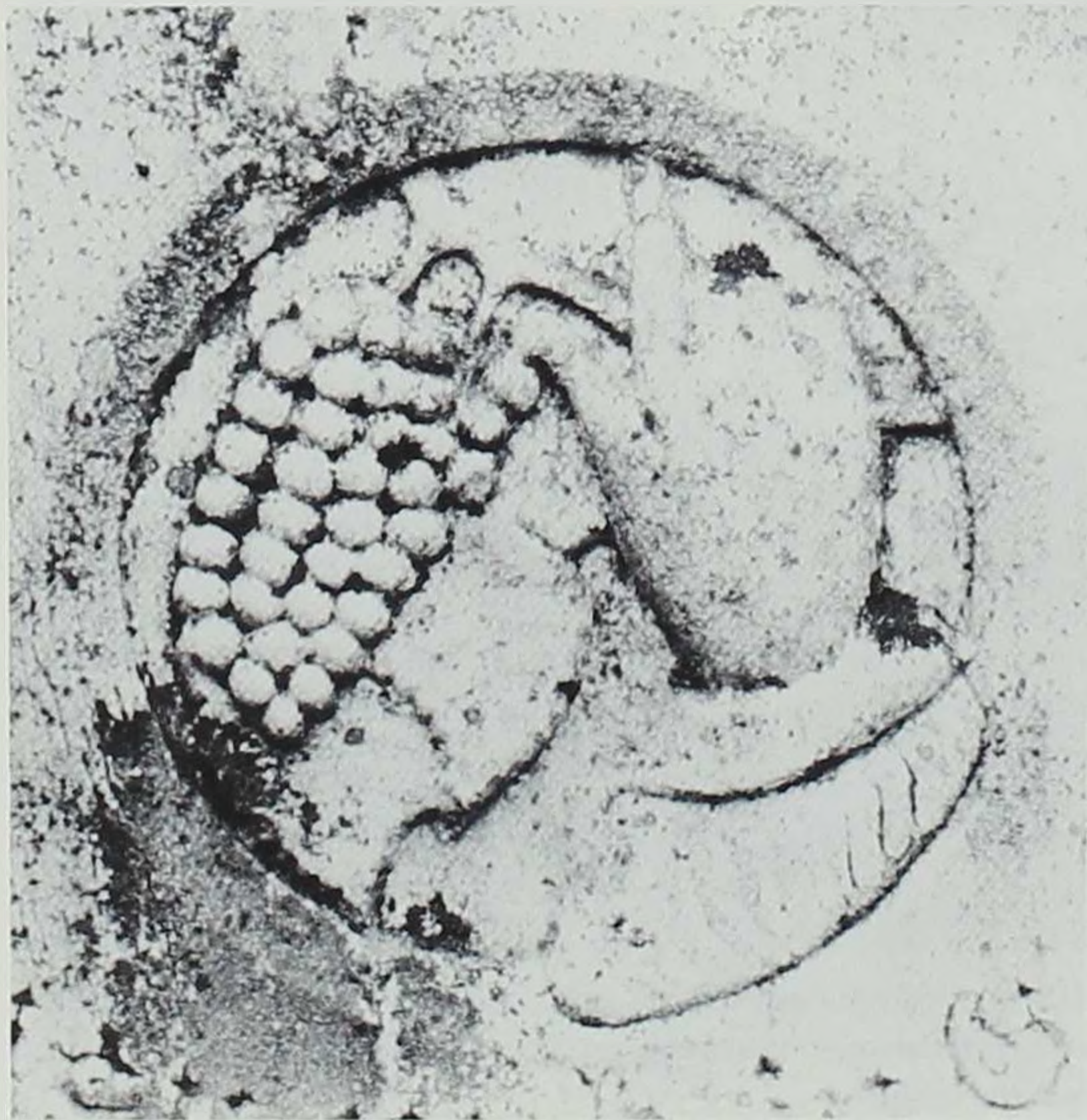


The classical architectural symbol of the pillar or column takes many forms. The complete pillar is simply a feature borrowed from a building, again with the idea of making the dead feel at home in the new surroundings. Fluted or smooth, it may have ivy vines creeping up the side or torches at the base. It may be surmounted with an urn or have wreaths draped over the top. A broken or incomplete column, however, symbolizes a life ended. This is another example of the borrowing of pre-Christian objects. The classical Greek column could become, for the Victorians, a useful symbol of death, just as could the Egyptian obelisk.



While an empty cradle or chair symbolizes the loss of that individual, it also represents the provision of familiar objects for the deceased. A representation of a child resting in a cradle or bed (above) was often used. A chair sometimes held a hat or shoes and stockings, as if the child had just undressed for the night.





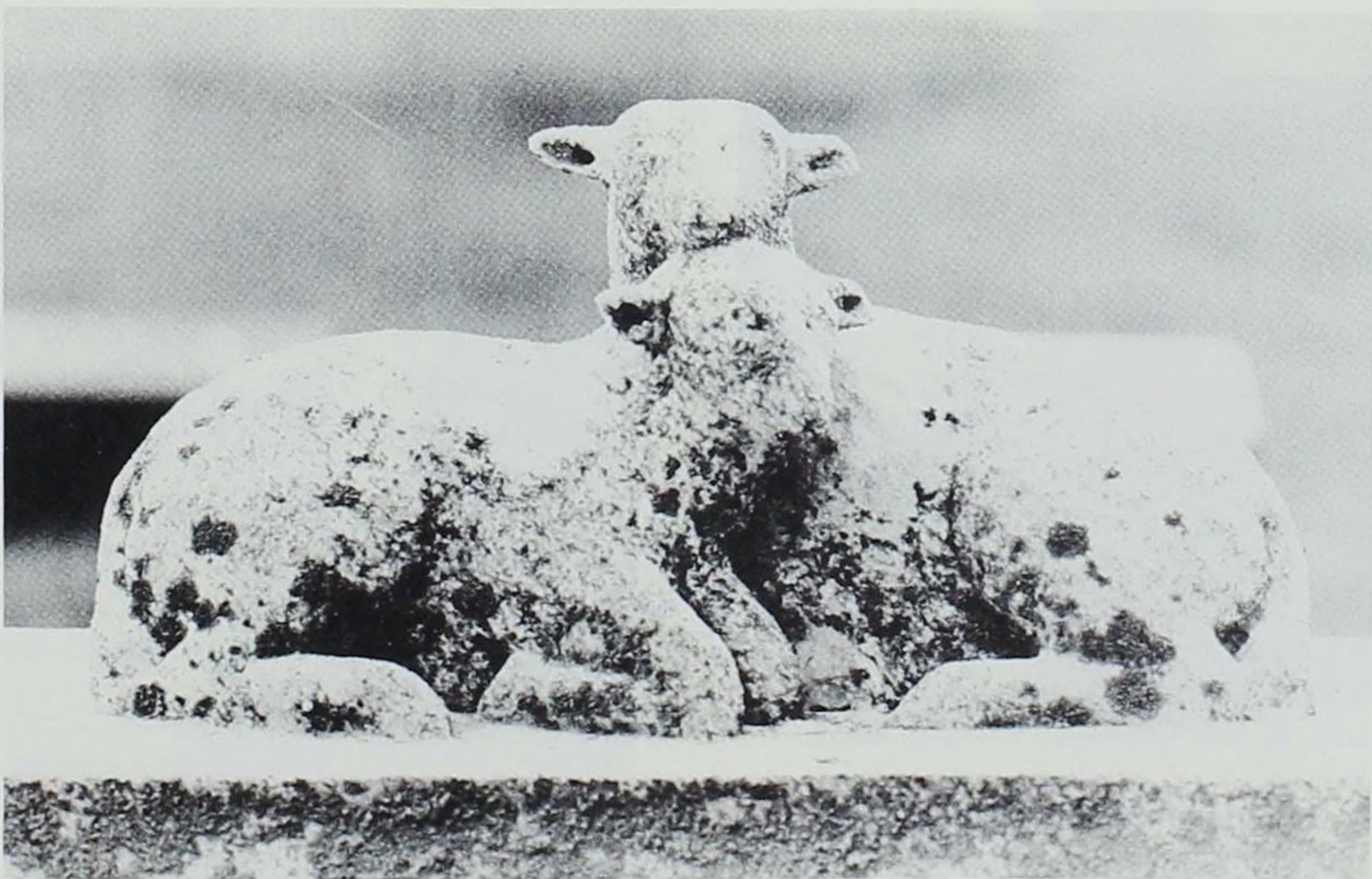
Wheat usually appears bundled into a sheaf and is ordinarily used on the grave markers of persons of fully mature years. Wheat is harvested when it is ripe and fully matured, and so with elderly people, to the Victorian frame of mind. If they have reached the biblical span of years, then they may be harvested to live in heaven. To the Victorians, this was exchanging a life with the probability of pain and suffering for a life where God would wipe away all tears. And, of course, it assured the survivors of the salvation of the soul of the deceased.

Sometimes a scythe or sickle appears with the wheat or alone on the grave markers of persons who have reached a maturity of years. In Revelation 14:18 is written, "Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe." Prior to the Victorian era, the scythe commonly appeared with a skeleton. It was a bald indication that life was short, people were sinners, and the grim reaper would inevitably come. Even softened with the Victorian ideas, the scythe and sickle are among the gloomier of the symbols used on grave markers.

A cluster of grapes (left) ordinarily means that the deceased was of mature years, ripe and ready for harvest by God. Rarely found with other fruits, grapes often appear in multiples of clusters. (The meaning of grape leaves separate from the fruit is obscure.)



When a book is portrayed on a grave marker and the words "Holy Bible" are not carved on it, it is most likely a book of life in which the good and bad deeds of the deceased are written. It may be open, closed, held in a hand, or sitting on its edge. A closed book suggests the finality of life. An open book, with one or both pages blank, suggests that the final acts have been written. There are no more words to be written and no reason to turn to a fresh page.



Symbolizing purity and innocence, the lamb often marks the death of a child. This Christian symbol relates to biblical references to Christ as the shepherd, believers as the flock, and body of the church as the sheep of His pasture. Perhaps one of the three or four most common symbols throughout the United States, the lamb is found in three-dimensional form, in relief sculpture, and in incised carving. And it is one of the most common symbols used on a baby's grave in the twentieth century.



The weeping willow vividly conveys the Victorian concept of death and mourning. Sometimes it is accompanied by a lamb, a plinth, or urn, or the kneeling figure of a classically garbed, grief-stricken woman. The Victorians loved to use the weeping willow on grave markers and to plant weeping willows in the cemetery. In both cases, it led to the proper frame of mind for visitors. A few references mention that if a weeping willow is cut down, it will send up new sprouts, symbolizing the soul's rebirth. Just as likely, people used the weeping willow because it looks sad.



Found in abundance in Iowa cemeteries, the dove symbolizes a winged messenger of God. Especially poignant is the dove flying upward with a broken-stemmed rosebud in its beak, indicating the death of a child. An olive branch or riband in its beak (usually labeled "rest in peace") probably indicates peace to the soul of the deceased. An anchor (here, with dove) often symbolizes that the soul is anchored safely in God's harbor. It seldom relates to the sea or navy.



Victorians often considered angels to be without gender and dressed them in classical clothing. The angels might bring the message of death or carry a soul back to God. Instances were common where the soul in the angel's arms was an actual image of the deceased. Angels rarely appeared on pre-Victorian grave markers.