

Dead Men Tell Tales: Analysing the Substance Written on the Gravestones of the Burial Grounds of Serampore

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***Abstract:** This article delves into the analysis of inscriptions found on the graves of Serampore, focusing on the Danish and Catholic cemeteries. Although lost over time, these writings were documented by various scholars. By comparing these with other sources, the writings offer deeper insights into the European Christian community in this area. The discussion reveals that prominent individuals and European families, not just of Danish descent, resided in Serampore during and after the Danish era, often favouring it for a residence after retirement. This sheds light on a different aspect of Serampore's urban life, showing how it evolved beyond its Danish roots.*

***Keywords:** Christian community, Catholic, Danish, European, Grave, Protestant etc.*

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“The heart’s keen anguish only those can tell

Who bid their dearest and best farewell.”

[These lines were written on the grave of Isabella Maria Middleton, who died on 26th October 1901]

Along the banks of the river Hooghly, several settlements were established by European colonial powers, all sharing common features. They comprised governmental houses,

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factories, docks, warehouses, and places of worship such as churches. Given the predominant Christian population among the colonists, each European habitation necessitated a dedicated burial ground. Such cemeteries can be found in Hugli-Chuchura, Chandannagar, Kolkata, Barrackpore, and notably in Serampore, which is the focus of this article.

Despite multiple visits to the renowned Danish cemetery in Serampore, we have never recognised the narratives concealed within the graves. We only know that this cemetery was established for the burial of the Danish officials who administered the town of Serampore during the colonial times. Most of the gravestones have disappeared or destroyed over time, and only four can be visible today. On our visit in March 2022, we wondered that what was written on those graves? So out of curiosity we searched if there were any records of this graveyard. Our search led us to the 1921 edition of 'Bengal Past and Present' where H. J. Hosten illuminated two pivotal aspects concerning Serampore. The first topic was the description of the Baptism Register for Serampore, which was kept in the Murghihata Cathedral—Commonly known as the Portuguese Church—of Kolkata.¹ The second centered on Christian inscriptions from Serampore, particularly the lost gravestones from the Serampore Catholic and Danish cemetery.² This valuable resource provided deeper insights into the European Christian community within this region.

In 1755, the Danish Asiatic Company acquired sixty *bighas* of land in Serampore.³ Upon this land, a settlement of Europeans emerged, spanning a mere three *bighas* along the shore of river Hooghly, named 'Frederiksnagore.' This pivotal moment set the stage for Danish possession in the region until 1845.⁴ With increasing settlements, places of worship often emerge. Serampore witnessed the construction of multiple churches, with the oldest being the 'Immaculate Conception Church,' also known as the Catholic Church. While officially established in 1783, historical records unveil baptisms dating back to 1769.⁵ Even during the British occupation of Chandannagar in 1757, Jesuit priests relocated to Frederiksnagore, ensuring the continuity of the Chandannagar register. Notably, 1758 witnessed the solemnization of seven marriages within Frederiksnagore.⁶ While George Toynebee posited the inception of a Christian religious center in Frederiksnagore around 1764.⁷ Although the church's formal construction likely occurred in 1783, with the help of Barretto family. Ole Bie, the then Governor of Frederiksnagore, gave a grant of Rs. 600 for the construction of this church.⁸ Significantly, he himself was a Protestant but donated to a Catholic church, possibly for his wife Juliana Bie who was a Catholic,⁹ and perhaps as a ploy to become popular as an administrator among the growing Catholic population.

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The settlement's growth necessitated a burial ground. Serampore housed four Christian cemeteries: the Catholic Cemetery (for Catholics), Danish Cemetery (for Danish and Protestant settlers), Mission Cemetery (for Serampore Mission adherents), and Johnnagar Cemetery (for local converts). Except for Johnnagar Cemetery, inscriptions on monuments within the other three were documented separately. Mr. Hosten meticulously chronicled the epitaphs within the Catholic and Danish cemeteries until the year 1910.

The Catholic Cemetery

The Catholic cemetery is situated in Gobinda Chandra Bhattacharjee Lane, Jhautala, beside the Danish Cemetery. It has remained in use to this day. However, there are no remaining old gravestones at present. But according to Hosten's description, the existence of nearly fifty gravestones was still evident in the early 20th century. Following the recorded description, the oldest tomb in this cemetery belonged to a ten-year-old boy named Mathew Cole, who passed away on the 26th of January 1811. His mother, Anna Cole, was also laid to rest here on the 8th of December 1819. On the 4th of December in the year 1840, a mere two-year-old child named Ellen Madigan was laid to rest at this very site.¹⁰

Notable among the graves in the cemetery is that of Charlotte Ashe. She passed away on the 11th of May in 1862. She was the wife of Charles Ashe.¹¹ According to the census of 1840, initiated by Danish government, Charles Ashe was identified as an Author.¹² He himself passed away on the 27th of December in 1869. Their daughter, Jane Rachel, who passed away on the 25th of January in 1870, was also laid to rest here.¹³ While the family has been referred to as Indo-Portuguese in the census, Charles Ashe has been termed as 'East Indian',¹⁴ (Anglo-Indian).¹⁵

The subsequent two noteworthy graves belong to distinct families, one being the D'Cruze family and the other the Gantzer family. The first grave pertains to John D'Cruze, who held the position of Deputy Magistrate of Serampore. According to the census of 1840, he was recorded as the Assistant Registrar at that time.¹⁶ While George Toynbee mentioned that he was a Police-Officer, an Inspector, during the Danish period.¹⁷ He passed away on the 21st of October in 1870. His wife, Charlotte D'Cruze, departed on the 30th of July 1890.¹⁸ Following the census, they had two children: John F. D'Cruze and Thomas G. D'Cruze.¹⁹

Regarding the Gantzer family, Anne Elizabeth Gantzer passed away on the 7th of July 1875. She was the second wife of Norbert Joseph Gantzer.²⁰ According to the census of 1840, Norbert Joseph Gantzer held a position in the British government.²¹ His life concluded on the

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4th of July in 1884, the same day as his first wife, Ann Charlotte.²² The 1840 census mentions Ann Charlotte Gantzer as the wife of Norbert Joseph Gantzer, and both are referred to as East Indian.²³ Their eighteen-year-old son, Ernest St. Clair Gantzer, breathed his last on the 27th of April 1871. Anne Charlotte Gantzer was possibly the sister of Norbert Joseph Gantzer. Her demise occurred on the 25th of November 1882. Additionally, Bernard S. Gantzer, the sixth child of the Gantzer couple, passed away on the 26th of January 1899.²⁴ The house of the Gantzer family is still stands in the Panchugopal Bhaduri Sarani, which is previously known as the Gantzer Street.²⁵

Following those, among the graves lies John Arthur Craven. He served as the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Serampore and passed away on the 15th of March 1877. Additionally, on the 1st of March 1885, James Augustine Greene departed. He was a Civil Surgeon in the Tripura State. His son, also named James Augustine Greene, passed away at the tender age of seven on the 10th of December 1872, and his daughter Marie Estelle Greene died at the age of three on 28th November 1879.²⁶

The information regarding the subsequent graves is quite interesting. This is the grave of Raymond Middleton, the third son of John Forbes Middleton who was a Captain of Bengal Army. According to the headstone, he passed away on the 9th of July 1884 in London, but he was interred on the 17th of September 1885.²⁷ This implies that his corpse had to be transported from distant London to Serampore, a journey that took over a year. The construction of this tomb was overseen by Isabella Maria Middleton, his wife, who herself passed away on the 26th of October 1901. Additionally, there is the grave of Cecil Joseph Middleton, the second son of John Forbes Middleton, who was an Executive Engineer at the Public Works Department. He passed away on the 30th of November 1887. Maria A. Middleton, the wife of John Forbes Middleton, passed away on the 27th of January 1876.²⁸

In addition, there are consecutive records of several child deaths. In 1894, Marlina passed away at the tender age of six. On June 4, 1895, Phil Alston departed this life at a mere one and a half months old. Mary Aline, the child of Thomas and Aline Jackson, passed away on May 8, 1904, at only three months old.²⁹

Danish Cemetery

The Danish cemetery situated in Dr TP Bhattacharjee Street, Jhautala, is a Protected Monument maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. More than sixty graves of this cemetery have been registered by H. Hosten in 1914. Among the registered graves, the oldest

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grave belonged to a woman named Anna Abigael Duntzfeldt. Her gravestone was inscribed in the Danish language. Anna was born on August 9, 1745, and she passed away at the age of thirty-six on May 16, 1781, in Frederiksnagore. The inscription was likely installed by her father, C. W. Duntzfeldt.³⁰

Recorded among the tombs is the memorial of Mr. J. Stewart, a merchant, who passed away at the age of thirty-nine in the year 1790. His tomb considered as direct evidence of the settlement of businessmen in Serampore in the eighteenth century. An interesting note is that he was presumably English.³¹ This implies that the trade activities in Serampore were not solely under the ownership of the Danes. The third and last recorded tomb from the 18th century is that of John Charles Wasmus. He passed away at the young age of one year in 1796.³²

Among the first recorded graves of the nineteenth century, information is found about the tomb of a woman named Charlotte Miranda, buried on 8th June 1801. And there is a mention of a tomb, belonging to Christiani Bie, the son of Danish Governor Ole Bie, died on 15th February 1802. The subsequent recorded tomb is that of Governor Colonel Ole (Olave) Bie himself. He passed away on the 18th of May, 1805.³³ The epitaph on his tomb, refurbished recently, remains present to this day. In that same year on 17th July, Christian William From passed away. His tomb inscription indicates that he served as a steward to the Danish Governor. In 1808, on July 10th, the mausoleum of William Basset, the son of Colonel T. T. Basset, was constructed.³⁴ T. T. Basset was an English Colonel who passed away in Serampore on October 25, 1818, but was buried in Barrackpore on October 26.³⁵ From the 'List of the Officers of the Bengal Army' we find out that Several other officers of the British army also died in Serampore, such as: King Perceval, Lieutenant (1815), Hugh Falconer Macfarlane, Lieutenant (1817), John Hyde, Clerk-Protector (1817), Arthur Tisdall Meredyth, Captain (1818), John Charles Mallett, Lieutenant (1825), Archibald Montgomerie, Captain (1826), John Raithby Revell, Captain (1850).³⁶ None of them were buried in Serampore. They were probably integrated into other settlements, particularly within the social circle of Barrackpore. However, they all resided in Serampore after their retirement.

The subsequent graves mainly belong to some employees of the Danish Asiatic Company and their families. For instance, on the 4th of November 1808, Martin Friderik Leisner, who served as a steward on a ship, passed away. He was born in 1782 in Copenhagen, Denmark. On the 8th of May 1812, Frederik Carl Smith, a captain on a ship of

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the Danish Asiatic Company, was buried here. On 1st August of the same year, Juliana Maria Wallich, the wife of the renowned botanist Nathaniel Wallich, also passed away.³⁷

At the age of around fifty-four, Factor Casper Top died on December 18th, 1812, was buried here.³⁸ The term 'Factor' means a merchant, indicating he was a merchant during his lifetime. His daughter constructed his mausoleum, which stands as one of the largest memorials within the Danish cemetery. This is probably a sign that he was financially well off because of trade.

Subsequently, further tomb inscriptions of several individuals were recorded. Died on April 29, 1824, the tomb of the Danish civilian Erik Kioer Muller revealed that he was a member of the 'Kings Council' in Serampore. This 'Kings Council' likely constituted an administrative body under the governor in Serampore.³⁹

The next notable tomb was that of Jacob Krefting, who served as the Governor of Serampore from 1805 to 1828 after Ole Bie. He was honoured as a 'Knight of the Royal Order of the Dannebrog.' Krefting was a colonel in the Danish army and the principal administrator of the Danish settlement in Bengal. He was born on October 9, 1757, in Norway and passed away on October 7, 1828, in Serampore.⁴⁰ His dedicated memorial remains preserved to this day.

Subsequently, information is found about an individual named Henry Henderson, who passed away on the 19th of October in 1839. He was the Deputy Secretary of the Bank of Bengal.⁴¹

On the 1st of April 1841, a woman named Amelia Dent passed away at the age of sixty-two due to cholera.⁴² Her name is recorded in the census of 1840. The notable aspect is her religion being mentioned as Roman Catholic there,⁴³ although she was buried among Protestants.

The last registered grave of the Danish period is that of James MC. Harg, who passed away on January 4, 1845.⁴⁴ The National Museum of Denmark's website asserts that no burials have taken place at the Danish cemetery since the Danes departed India in 1845.⁴⁵ However, historical records indicate a continuous usage of the cemetery, contradicting this claim.

Information is found about a person named James Weabens, who was a contemporary Railway Works Supervisor. His demise occurred on March 24, 1853, and buried in the Danish Cemetery. On July 25, 1857, Ellen Mary Pringle passed away. She was only nine months old at the time of her death. There is a grave of Charles Joseph, who was a Surveyor on G.T.

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Road. He passed away on June 4, 1859, and tragically, his son William Charles died at the tender age of one year and seven months on April 8, 1862. Afterward, a student named Cecil Alfred, on September 15, 1863, while bathing in the pond situated at Serampore College, drowned, and William Woolley was an Assistant Surgeon who passed away on November 6 of the same year.⁴⁶

John Gotlieb Herrold was a Government Employee who served for fifty-eight years, passing away at the age of seventy-three on January 22, 1866. In that same year, on February 3, his youngest son, George Gotlieb Herrold, passed away at the age of sixteen. On May 21, 1869, at the age of seventy-five, William Wollen, a Bengal Civil Service officer, passed away. He had a rum distillery in Ballavpur during Danish period.⁴⁷ His widow, Ann Elisabeth Wollen, commemorated his memory with a memorial plaque, at St. Olav's Church, which can still be admired today. Richard Glassup was an employee of the East Indian Railway, succumbing to a prolonged and painful illness at the age of forty on March 7, 1878. On February 18, 1891, Alexander Stewart passed away at the age of fifty-eight.⁴⁸ His name was recorded in the Census of 1840 when he was just fourteen years old and was studying at John Mack's school, identified as being of East Indian descent.⁴⁹

The notable tomb that follows belongs to General George Byers Mainwaring.⁵⁰ He was born on July 18, 1825, in the Bengal Presidency. He acquired his education from Mr. Tulloch's Academy in Aberdeen, Scotland, and later under the guidance of Messrs Stoton and Mayor, Wimbledon near London. In 1841, he was appointed to the 16th Bengal Native Infantry. He displayed valour during the Gwalior campaign of 1843 and the First Sikh War of 1845–46, for which he was honoured with the 'Gwalior Campaign Bronze Star' and the 'Sutlej Campaign Medal'. After numerous promotions, he ascended to the rank of Lieutenant General in 1887. He undertook special studies of the Lepcha language and in 1876, he published 'A grammar of the Róng (Lepcha) language, as it exists in the Dorjeling and Sikim hills', a grammar book on the Lepcha language. On January 16, 1893, he passed away in Serampore.⁵¹

The last documented grave in this cemetery belongs to Emily Christadoss, who passed away on July 28, 1964. This indicates that the cemetery was active until the late 1960s.

Among the numerous sculptors responsible for erecting these gravestones, three names can be traced back to Serampore: Paul (J. H.), Paul & Son, and Llewelyn & Sons.⁵² The census of 1840 makes a specific mention of J. H. Paul as a Stone Mason and Undertaker.⁵³

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Conclusion

From this discussion and descriptions, we can observe that this cemetery, rather intriguingly, houses the resting places of a diverse array of individuals, encompassing English, Portuguese, and even East Indian personalities. What's notable is that among these buried individuals, there were some who followed the beliefs of Catholic Christianity. This amalgamation of diverse backgrounds and faiths within the cemetery indicates that it was not exclusively designated for Danish or Protestant burials; rather, it served as a final resting place for a multitude of communities, showcasing a rich tapestry of cultural and religious diversity.

Delving deeper into the nature of Catholic and Danish cemeteries, it becomes evident that a significant proportion of the graves belonged to individuals of elevated social standing, such as army officials, administrative officers, distinguished surgeons, surveyors, and other high-ranking personalities. Their presence within the cemetery emphasizes the social layer and the prominent roles these individuals played within the community of Serampore during their lifetimes.

These burial grounds stand as a testament to the multifaceted nature of Serampore. Beyond being solely a flourishing trade center, it also functioned as a haven for retirement among European and Eurasian settlers, who chose to establish their residences along the picturesque banks of the Hooghly River.⁵⁴ The designation of Serampore as 'the cleanest town in India' was a key feature for their attraction.⁵⁵ These settlers contributed significantly to the area's urban fabric, establishing a vibrant community complete with essential amenities such as taverns, hospitals, and educational institutions. The establishment of these facilities not only enriched the daily lives of the inhabitants but also shaped the evolving urban landscape of Serampore. Consequently, the influx of European settlers and their subsequent settlements brought about a considerable shift in the demographics and the overall urban culture of the town of Serampore.

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