

Greening Death

Issues of Choice, Control, Meaning and Ritualization Surrounding Natural Burial

Master Thesis
Religion and the Public Domain



Submitted by

Marissa Herder

Submitted to

Dr. Christoph Jedan

Dr. Mathilde van Dijk

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i. Abstract

Natural burial is a growing trend in the funeral industry which has recently experienced a surge in popularity in the Netherlands. In order to understand the appeal of this practice, this thesis aims to identify the reasons for which people choose and offer natural burial, and how different motivations shape the ritualization at burial sites. Three categories are identified based on 6 semi-structured interviews and a survey with 41 respondents, as well as 5 interviews with providers of natural burials. Sentimental reasons relate to a general love for nature, a sense of belonging in nature and a desire to go back to it. Environmental reasons stem from ecological concern, as natural burial is a fairly sustainable form of body disposal. Practical reasons include unburdening children and loved ones since there is no monument to maintain or grave rights to be prolonged and payed. Land owners offer their site for burial partially for financial reasons and passion about the concept which is largely based on the same reasons as those of the participants.

The ritualization at graves on natural burial sites is different from regular cemeteries, both because of the stricter rules as well as the availability of a new type of facilities. Furthermore, a choice for natural burial is a form of self-expression and points to a specific understanding of death as highly personalized, familiar and controllable. Ultimately, this is interesting for the field of ritual and death studies because fits in with the current trend of individualized funerals even though the graves seem anonymous. This study contributes to a better understanding of natural burial as a trend in the Netherlands based on original data as well as a critical evaluation of insights from previous studies.

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1. Introduction

The practice of natural burial has recently experienced a surge in popularity in the Netherlands. While some say it can be traced back to the megalithic graves in Drenthe for example, the newest natural burial sites in the Veluwe are very different. Currently, there are many nature sites in the Netherlands that allow burial of remains or ashes on their grounds, some larger than others. An important distinction between sites that call themselves ‘natural’ and those that are considered the most natural for the purpose of this thesis is the extent to which they allow objects and markings to be placed at the grave. A natural burial site, sometimes called woodland burial, eco-burial or green burial site, can be defined as a space within a field or forest that has been designated for the burial of bodies or ashes. It “entails that the corpse must not be embalmed and should be interred within a ‘biodegradable’ coffin or shroud [...] placed with no headstone in ‘natural’ landscapes that range from mature woodland to wildflower meadows (Davies and Rumble 2012).” Depending on the policy of the site, little to no markings are allowed to be put on the grave. Graves are supposed to blend in with nature so that they are indistinguishable from the rest of the area.

A key word that is often connected with this form of burial in advertising by funeral directors and sites is ‘sustainable’. However, it is questionable if the impact on the environment is really a concern for people who choose natural burial. Two sets of reasons for choosing natural burial have been identified in a previous Dutch study by Tineke Nugteren (2014), namely ‘light green’ and ‘dark green’ ones. Reasons that stem from a concern for the environment and sustainability are considered dark green, based on Bron Taylor’s (2010) concept of dark green religion. Reasons related to the vaguely romantic sense of calmness and peacefulness of the environment, specifically ‘going back to nature’, are called light green.¹ Since more and more natural burial sites are opening their doors within the next few years and more people are considering being buried this way, it is important to understand why people are drawn to this practice. Furthermore, previous anthropological research has indicated that natural burial is largely unregulated and people interested in such a burial as well as sites themselves attach vastly different ideas and values to the practice (Clayden, Hockey and Powell 2010, 48). It is therefore important to investigate what people understand by this term. Until now, little research on the trend has made use of original data. This thesis will evaluate earlier claims about the motivations and values behind natural burial, based on interviews and site visits in the Netherlands.

¹ All concepts will be explained and critically evaluated in chapter 2.

The objective of this thesis is to identify the reasons for which people choose and offer natural burial, and how different motivations shape the ritualization at burial sites. I will argue that a choice for natural burial is a form of self-expression and points to a specific understanding of death as highly personalized, familiar and controllable. In order to be able to do this, I will first establish a new classification system consisting of sentimental, environmental and practical reasons, and I will show that sentimental reasons are the most compelling for people who are interested in natural burial, despite natural burial sites focusing their advertising on environmental aspects.² Firstly, the history and current status of natural burial in the Netherlands will be outlined. After describing the methodology and the theoretical framework behind this study, the concepts used in earlier studies will be critically evaluated. In the following chapter, I will present the results and analysis from the data collection for sentimental, practical and environmental reasons. These reasons will be compared to the messages presented in advertisements by different companies and the motivations of natural burial sites in the next chapter. Lastly, the implications of the differences between motivations will be assessed and I will show in what way this practice ultimately still fits in with the current trend in the field of death studies of a personalized funeral.

1.1 Rediscovery and surge in popularity³

The ritualization of death is ever changing, but has experienced change more strongly over the past decades. According to Philippe Ariès (1976), rituals and attitudes towards death remained quite similar during specific time periods and only changed gradually, until halfway through the last century when changes became more rapid. Most notably, funerals have become more personalized than before, truly emphasizing the life of the deceased in a unique ceremony that is designed in cooperation with the family, rather than following standardized scripts (Venbrux, Peelen and Altena 2009). It is often said that secularization has played a large role in this process, since religious protocols used to be the norm. The Netherlands is one of the more secularized countries in Europe, and Venbrux et al. note that the end of the pillarization has opened doors to new possibilities within funerary rites. Natural burial is one of the ‘new’ trends that has developed after the 1960s. It must be noted that the number of

² The terms ‘reasons’ and ‘motivations’ have a slightly different meaning. When speaking of reasons in terms of the classification system it can be assumed that these are of a motivating nature and are an incentive for certain choices and behaviors related to natural burial. The terms will therefore be used interchangeably.

³ Sections 1.1, 1.2, 2.1 and 4.1 are largely copied from my earlier essay “The Reasoning Behind Environmentally Friendly Funerals” from February 2016, upon which this thesis was built.

cemeteries⁴ in the Netherlands lies somewhere between 3000 and 5000 depending on the source, and therefore the ten to twenty natural burial sites form a very small component of the total amount (van Steen and Pellenbarg 2006, 623). Nonetheless, the rise in popularity and the preparation for further growth of the practice by different companies make the ritual worth studying.

The United Kingdom is often seen as the birthplace of natural burial in the modern context. The first site was established in 1994, and today there are over 300 sites. The practice is far more widespread in the United Kingdom than in any other country in the world. Cremation only began to become popular in 1885 in the United Kingdom, but by 2014 natural burial and cremation had already reached a similar level in terms of numbers (Davies 2015, 347). An important distinction between different countries lies in the types of natural burial sites. In the United Kingdom, it is common for former agricultural or industrial grounds to be transformed into a designated site, which slowly becomes a memorial forest through the planting of a tree at every new grave (Davies 1997). In the Netherlands, natural burial sites are commonly established within existing mature woodland, and while new nature may be developed on parts of a site, it is not the case that memorial trees are planted at each grave.

The first natural burial site in the Netherlands was established on the private grounds of a family in the Veluwe in 1955. The practice became popular in 2004 after the first commercial site, Bergerbos opened (Sengers 2012). Currently, the three largest funeral directing companies, Yarden, Monuta and DELA, pay some attention to natural burials in their brochures and on their websites. Furthermore, a few companies dedicated to natural burial have been founded in recent years. For example, Natuurbegraven Nederland B.V. [*Natural burial the Netherlands*] has established a partnership with Natuurmonumenten [*Nature monuments*] to ensure that natural burial can be organized on grounds that they manage (“Natuurbegraven” n.d.). This is beneficial for both parties, as the company gets access to burial space in some of the most popular nature sites of the country, and Natuurmonumenten can make sure that their sites remain unchanged for decades. The sites offer eternal grave rest and register the reserved and occupied graves with notaries so that the ground cannot be given another destination (“Geen zorgen,” n.d.). In a dense country like the Netherlands where natural environments are becoming increasingly scarce, a natural burial site is a way to keep an area intact for a very long time.

⁴ When referring to ‘traditional’ or ‘regular’ cemeteries or burial sites, I mean the way they are commonly structured in the Netherlands. Graves lie in neat rows, with little space in between and are marked with marble or glass headstones or other small monuments with personal inscriptions.

1.2 Current situation

There is a distinction between natural burial sites, where nature is usually not regulated and there are little to no markers, and a natural part of a regular burial site, where the density is higher but graves are slightly more scattered across a field. Some sites are difficult to classify, which is why the official number of natural burial sites is unclear. The sites that are considered natural for the purpose of this thesis belong to the former category, namely Hillig Meer, Heidepol, Bergerbos, Weverslo, Venlo-Maasbree, De Hoevens, Reiderwolde, and Slangenborg. The first four of these have participated actively in this study, and three of them are members of the sector association Brana which has a strict code of conduct (“Brana gedragscode” n.d.).⁵

From the frequency with which natural burial is brought up in the media, it seems as if it were a well-established alternative to regular burial and cremation. While numbers for both demand and supply are increasing, the total percentage of natural burials is estimated to be around 0.15% of all funerals, which comes down to some 300 natural burials a year. In 2014, 63% of people chose for cremation and 37% chose for regular burial (“Journalisten over Natuurbegraven” n.d.). However, with space for 2600 people on Heidepol alone, most natural burial sites are much larger than regular cemeteries (“Masterplan” 2011). All four sites have indicated that they have around three times as many reservations as occupied graves, which means that even though the sites are not very full yet, this will be the case in the future.

⁵ Of the four participating sites, only Bergerbos is not a member.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework

This thesis makes use of a mixed methods approach. Data was gathered using a survey consisting of nine brief questions to obtain a general overview of the respondents' interest in natural burial (Appendix A). The target group consisted of people who already knew they wanted a natural burial, as well as people who were seriously considering it. The first three questions were about demographics and possible religious beliefs. The aim of the next set of questions was to investigate their previous experiences with natural burial. Lastly, there were three questions to gain insight into their personal motivations for wanting a natural burial. The survey was spread among the target group through websites and Facebook pages of natural burial sites, and companies promoting this form of burial. In total, there were 41 respondents. Participants could indicate their willingness to take part in a follow-up interview based on the survey, which resulted in 6 interviews with people who were interested in natural burial.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, with basic questions and room for following up on particular responses (Appendix B). Furthermore, interviews were conducted with people who are involved in the management of the chosen sites, as well as companies involved in the promotion of natural burial (Appendix C). This resulted in 5 interviews, and gave an overview of the reasons for offering natural burial. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to five key concepts which emerged from the data, namely positive associations, negative associations, practical concerns, sentimental reasons and environmental reasons. The discourse from the interviews, brochures and online advertisement was analyzed based on these concepts. Especially the distinction between different sets of reasons is important for the argument of this thesis. Environmental reasons are relatively straight-forward, and include anything that specifically mentions the environmental impact and consequences for nature. Sentimental reasons are more difficult to pin down and can entail many different aspects which are based on emotions and nostalgia, such as calmness, going back to nature, belonging in nature, peacefulness, and being set apart from traditional funerals. The nuances of the different reasons that were identified by Nugteren (2014) will be further evaluated in section 2.2, after which I will elaborate on the categories that can be distinguished based on this study in the third chapter.

2.1 Religion and spirituality

It must be noted that both 'religion' and 'spirituality' are problematic concepts in this case since the definition is highly debated in almost all academic fields. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of this topic, which is connected to religious studies, death studies and

ritual studies among others, it is important to make some general remarks about how these terms will be used in this study. When speaking about religion in theoretical terms, it refers to a very wide range of beliefs and practices of different world religions and mostly concerns organized religion. Unless specifically indicated that an idea relates to Christianity or even a particular denomination, these ideas are applicable to religion in general. Spirituality on the other hand is a much broader, and perhaps vaguer term as will be shown in this section. Since most of the participants were raised in a family that actively practiced religion they were able to speak about the beliefs that they were brought up with in a concrete manner. Their current beliefs were much more undefined, fluid and only indirectly related to natural burial. Spirituality and religion are therefore important concepts in this study, but they cannot be clearly defined and have different meanings to the participants. The discussion of issues related to spirituality in the results of this study are therefore my personal analysis, informed by both the theoretical frameworks presented in this chapter as well as the language used by participants themselves.

It is important to place the discussion surrounding natural burial in the context of the emerging field of religion and ecology so that the link between spirituality and nature that is important in this thesis can be understood within an academic context. For example, Genesis 3:19 reads: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (ESV).” This passage lays out the thought that many people seem to have regarding natural burial, namely that they want to go back to nature where they came from, an idea that is common in the liturgy of most Christian denominations. While religion and nature are very much intertwined, the academic discourse surrounding this relationship only started in 1996 (Tucker 2006, 6). Since then, it has become widely accepted that religion has played a significant role in shaping attitudes towards the environment. Davies and Rumble (2012) have argued that reasons to choose for natural burial should be seen as beliefs rather than just ideas, because they are related to “core concepts respecting life’s meaning and destiny (124).”

Religions have a history of creating dogmatic views, and have been slow to acknowledge the importance of the environmental issues at hand (Tucker 2006, 9). Because of the religious norms and values that have helped shape today’s society including some of the pressing issues, religion can also contribute to the solution of these problems. Overall, it is important to consider environmental issues from the perspective of moral obligations, because attitudes towards nature are crucial in this field, especially when looking at the environmental reasons to choose a natural burial. While organized religion has been important in building

attitudes and shaping society, the status of religion is changing and it is more appropriate to speak of spirituality in this context instead. According to Lucy Bregman's *Ecology of Spirituality* (2014), this concept entails a deep connection to the universe, and truth and wholeness to our life. The landscape of knowledge and ideas surrounding spirituality continues to grow and develop in what she calls a "post-religious age." Similar to the ideas of Bron Taylor (2010), spirituality is a more flexible concept that deals with "one's deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences (13)." Taylor makes the connection to environmentalism by saying that spirituality also includes ideas on personal growth and one's place in the universe, which is intertwined with ecological concern.

From this notion, one can make the transition to the relationship between the academic field of religion and ecology and natural burial. If we indeed employ a flexible definition of spirituality, both sentimental and environmental reasons to choose for a natural burial are almost per definition spiritual because the term can encompass many different motivations. Occasionally, religious reasons for natural burial are explicitly referenced. Nugteren (2014) notes that even though God is not always specifically mentioned, the idea of returning to nature to perform a certain task, namely to help grow new nature, is part of a religious narrative (84). Furthermore, there is a symbolic sense of immortality within this reasoning, because the body will fall apart but live on in the new life forms that grow from it. This was also found by Davies and Rumble (2012), as the language of participants surrounding natural burial shifted away from religious afterlife beliefs towards personally constructed beliefs of spirituality as "a sense of depth and meaningfulness of life (125)." An environmentally friendly funeral therefore fits perfectly in the framework of religion and ecology, since a person could carry out their responsibility to care for the environment beyond their death. However, there are some important considerations that need to be brought up following this logic. While all different reasons can be said to have a spiritual undertone, this is not a main focus of this thesis. It is most interesting to distinguish the aspects that are directly related to spirituality with regards to the language and motivations surrounding natural burial. The differing ideas on spirituality of the participants in this study must be taken into account. In the next sections these concepts and their implications will be critically evaluated.

2.2 Literature review and definition of concepts

This thesis aims to explore the wide range of motivations for wanting and offering natural burial. A classification system for the different reasons why people choose this could be useful for research purposes, but risks being oversimplified. However, since a large part of

this project consists of identifying the meanings people attach to various concepts such as nature, spirituality and death, it is useful to consider earlier work that has attempted to divide the motivations into comprehensible groups.

As mentioned previously, the classification system by Tineke Nugteren (2014) formed the initial basis for this project. Her ideas on light and dark green reasons are a word play on Bron Taylor's idea of dark green religion, which I have explored briefly in the previous section. Nugteren explains the theoretical framework behind natural burial by exploring notions of dying within western culture, different ideas on grief and consolation with respect to nature and how even natural burial sites are largely constructed, which has implications for people's understanding of what 'natural' means. Nugteren mentions many light green "vaguely romantic" reasons that are based on existing literature as well as conversations at three different sites in the south of the Netherlands. These include a tender atmosphere in nature, which can have a therapeutic effect and provide consolation similar to the effect of religion. Blending in with nature and going back to it are also frequently mentioned, as well as giving back to the earth by becoming part of the soil. This has a sense of symbolic immortality because a person will live on within the plants that their remains nurture. Nature is also seen as a constant factor which will always exist in one form or another and therefore provides continuity and stability. Another factor Nugteren mentions is the disapproval with a collectively, neatly arranged and structured death after having lived a very individual life. Nature is both concrete and mystical at the same time, which is attractive to many people.

Beside these light green emotion-based reasons, Nugteren also explores the dark green reasons related to environmental concern or even activism. People do not want to be buried with chemicals, lead and other artificial materials, in decorated coffins. They see regular burial and cremation as involving too many machines and processes. The low environmental impact of natural burial is therefore often mentioned, as well as the protection of natural landscapes. The body is not seen as toxic waste but as a contribution to the ecosystem. Natural burial can help ensure a healthy planet for future generations based on this line of reasoning. All of these motivations were mentioned by participants in the study by Davies and Rumble (2012) as well. Some of these environmental reasons have an emotional component to them, and are arguably spiritual when looking at the concept of dark green religion. It must therefore be concluded that there is no concrete line between these light and dark green reasons. Perceiving nature as a framework or system to rely on, similar to how people rely on a church, is an interesting claim that Nugteren makes which will be explored further in the discussion of the results of this thesis. People strongly feel part of the larger whole and

narratives indicate that the life cycle idea is an important underlying reason for natural burial (Nugteren 2014, 94). However, these ideas do not have to be a replacement for spirituality, they are not mutually exclusive so they can also exist alongside explicit religious beliefs and notions of an afterlife. Furthermore, the environmental reasons to choose for natural burial can vary greatly. For example, Nugteren has argued that for some people natural burial might simply be a way to feel less guilty about the carbon footprint they left during their lives (94).

One of the main points that Nugteren makes is that natural burial sites can be perceived as desolate because of its raw realism (86). She aims to demonstrate how these sites are perhaps not as idyllic as they are made out to be, both in advertisement and in people's minds. When the bereaved cannot find themselves in the deceased's choice for a natural burial, they might feel as if they are leaving their loved ones unprotected, not cared for and nameless. Especially under weather circumstances other than sunshine in a season where the plants and trees are not in bloom, a site may have a very different atmosphere than the bereaved are comfortable with. Nugteren furthermore criticizes the notion of these burial sites as pure and natural, because they are effectively managed landscapes that are exploited for this particular purpose (90). A last consideration that is important when looking at this practice is the consequence it may have on our current expressive grave culture. While this has already changed with the rise of cremation and the scattering of ashes often without a physical, public monument, natural burial sites are the first burial sites where graves are not marked with a headstone. Whereas graves have in the past been seen as individual memorials and sometimes even status symbols with true historical value, these natural graves are marked with degradable materials or simple rocks so that nothing will be recognizable in a couple of decades (95). However, it must be noted that the loss of grave culture was also already ongoing on regular burial sites in the Netherlands, since it is nearly impossible to get an eternal grave and most are emptied and reused after ten or twenty years when the rights are not prolonged by family members.

One of the main scholars who has published extensively on the topic of natural burial in the United Kingdom is Douglas Davies. A key argument in his work is that funerary professionals have always spoken ritual 'words against death', meaning that it has become customary in most western cultures to reframe loss as hopeful messages for the future while staying connected to the past (Davies 2005, 110). The aim is to soften death, to give it more beauty and positivity because the reality is difficult to accept. This can furthermore be related to Davies' research on the relationship between life styles and death styles. He has claimed that people will organize their funerals as an extension of how they lived (Davies 2010, 49).

He believed that this would mean people who lived sustainably and cared about the environment would choose for a natural burial as a way to reflect their life values. Another important work is a book based on the fieldwork of Hannah Rumble, whose case study of Barton Glebe, a site near Cambridge, combined with Davies' expertise in religion and death studies forms an important contribution to the field (Davies and Rumble 2012).

There are two other notable studies that must be mentioned in this chapter. The first one is another Dutch one, conducted by Mirjam Klaassens and Peter Groote (2011) at Bergerbos. They focused on several aspects of the site, the practice itself and the community of bereaved that is created through the events that are organized. They furthermore show how the different landscapes of natural burial sites in the United Kingdom and Bergerbos have implications for memorialization and the individuality of the deceased, because the monuments at Bergerbos are removed after the grave rights expire whereas memorial trees remain indefinitely. Memorialization and preserving the individuality of the deceased are important elements in this thesis as well, but since Bergerbos is very different from other Dutch natural burial sites I will draw broader conclusions about these issues. The second study focuses on the United Kingdom and was conducted by Clayden et al. (2014), which has resulted in an elaborate book. It gives an overview of all the main processes involved in natural burial, and discusses the history, different motivations and the organizational aspects related to the creation of a natural burial site. Several case studies are presented, both natural burial sites and stories of people. The book finishes with an overview of general considerations related to the implications of natural burial as a practice. A similar setup is used in this thesis on a much smaller scale, but I will focus more strongly on the people rather than the sites.

A few of the assumptions regarding the status of natural burial sites do not align with what was found in this study. Before going into the different motivations, it must be noted that the discrepancy between life style and death style can indeed be great and I will argue that people generally do not choose natural burial out of ecological concern after a sustainable life.⁶ However, this does not mean that the bereaved have a problem with the reality of the practice necessarily, especially since most burial sites go to great lengths to acquaint a family with their site before a burial takes place. When asked, all four burial sites indicated that the only aspect of natural burial some bereaved find difficult is that they are not allowed to leave objects at the grave, which is made explicitly clear to anyone who visits during the process of

⁶ My understanding of the relationship between life style and death style based on the present study is presented in chapter 5.1.

reserving a grave. In the majority of cases close family and friends will be part of the process of choosing a spot and arranging such a funeral, meaning that feelings of leaving the deceased unprotected and nameless can be easily prevented with the choice of casket and grave marker. Respondents furthermore indicated that they find nature equally beautiful under different weather circumstances, or would choose to visit on another day or during a different season if they felt uncomfortable. In short, these feelings of desolation seem to stem from an unawareness of what natural burial entails, which sites try to limit as much as possible by providing ample information for both the person making the choice and their loved ones.

While Nugteren (2014) and Klaassens and Groote (2011) have come to some interesting conclusions based on their Dutch studies, and Clayden et al. (2014) and Davies and Rumble (2012) have done extensive work on this topic in the United Kingdom, this thesis aims to make a contribution to the field by focusing specifically on individual people and their motivations rather than sites as a whole, while at the same time providing a more elaborate perspective on the practice of natural burial in the Netherlands than previous studies have done. While all aforementioned studies have outlined a variety of motivations behind a choice for natural burial, none have systematically focused on these motivations while also taking the reasons for offering the practice into account. The fieldwork in the present study shows that sentimental and environmental reasons are not all there is to the individual motivations to choose for natural burial. In order to maintain clarity, I will attempt to put the reasons that were brought up by the participants in this study into categories while maintaining caution not to oversimplify them. The motivations similar to what Nugteren calls light green will be named sentimental reasons, and the dark green ones will be called environmental reasons. A third category will be added, namely practical reasons. These are mostly overlooked in previous studies, but play a very important role in the choice for a natural burial as opposed to regular burial or cremation. The reasons that fall under these three categories will be described extensively in the next chapter.

3. Reasons to choose for natural burial

In order to understand the growing popularity of natural burial, it is important to consider the responses from people who are interested in having one. A survey was created based on the insights from previous studies.⁷ The aim of this survey was to find out if people valued the sentimental aspects over the environmental aspects, which appeared to be the case. Out of 41 respondents, 34 people stated that their love for nature and being given back to nature outweighed the fact that it is one of the most sustainable options for body disposal at the moment. While everyone was interested in a natural burial, only 10 people had visited a site and 18 were planning to do so in the near future. Each respondent briefly stated why they were considering natural burial, which gave a more diverse insight into the reasons. 6 people indicated they were willing to participate in an in-depth interview. The survey and the interview data led to the addition of a third category, namely practical reasons. In this chapter, the specific associations of participants with regards to sentimental, environmental and practical reasons will be explored.

3.1 Sentimental reasons⁸

The first category of sentimental reasons is the largest and most diverse of the three. Many of these reasons pertain to the participants' associations with nature. Most of them were raised with specific religious beliefs but none of them were affiliated with a church at this point in their lives. All of them considered themselves spiritual to some extent, which became clear through the language that was employed when speaking about death. These spiritual ideas in particular shaped their perception of nature and death. As one participant noted: "Nature is where we come from, where we belong, and where we will go back to after death (participant 2, personal communication, April 11 2016)." This characterizes the feeling of most participants in the study. Some had specific ways of identifying nature, referring to it as a being such as Mother Nature or a system such as the carbon cycle (participant 1, personal communication, April 21 2016). Nature was furthermore seen as dynamic and full of life with plants and animals, whereas a regular cemetery was only associated with death. Regardless of the spiritual or biological basis underlying their thoughts, an important aspect for the participants was equality. In nature as well as in death, we are all equal. This is not the case on regular cemeteries where monuments and headstones can be used as a reflection of wealth.

⁷ Most notably Nugteren (2014) and Davies and Rumble (2012).

⁸ All data in the following sections comes from the cited interviews, unless otherwise indicated. Participants are not mentioned by name but instead given a number from 1 through 6 by which the interviews can be identified. The anonymized transcripts can be requested from the author. Interviews were conducted in Dutch, the direct quotations that appear in the main text were translated to English by the author.

Everybody has a place in nature, regardless of their background.

A second factor which was often mentioned was a general love for nature. Many participants indicated that they “just love nature,” without being able to explain why. Some elements that were frequently mentioned are the beauty of nature, nature as calm, quiet and peaceful and a place to relax. Nature was also connected to nostalgia related to past vacations and leisure activities such as walking, biking trips and camping. It can be seen that for most participants, nature is a part of their life, both in the sense of enjoying forests and large areas as well taking care of indoor plants or a garden. Two participants felt the need to explicitly state that they were not “nature freaks” in the sense of ecological concern, sustainable lifestyles and eating habits for example, which indicates that they do not want to be associated with certain extremes of loving nature (participants 4 and 5, personal communication, April 15 and 9 2016).

As briefly mentioned above, participants’ interest in natural burial goes hand in hand with a discontent with regular cemeteries. This was also found by Klaassens and Groote (2011) in their case study of the Bergerbos site. For some people, it was about the experience of the environment for the surviving relatives, which was ‘positive’ and ‘alive’ rather than ‘cold’, which was connected to regular cemeteries (235). The latter were seen as cold because of the abundance of stone and the neat straight rows of graves were considered formal and impersonal. Three participants felt that cemeteries were so unpleasant that they would rather be cremated than buried there, but they were not comfortable with the idea of being burned either. Finding out about natural burial was therefore a welcome alternative to the existing options. Such narratives were also frequently found by Davies and Rumble (2012).

An interesting aspect to consider is related to the way people speak about lying in their grave. The participants were asked to describe how they envisioned their grave at a natural burial site, or describe the grave they had already chosen. This description often made use of words that indicated that the participants might experience lying there, such as “I wanted to look out over the meadow (participants 1 and 2),” “I want to lie under a [particular type of] tree (participant 5),” “I want to face my hometown (Jos Nacken, personal communication, April 11 2016),” “I want a spot with lots of sunlight (survey respondent),” “or “I do not want to lie in the forest because it is stifling (participant 2).” These notions imply dualist thinking and afterlife beliefs, which will be further discussed in section 3.4.

3.2 Environmental reasons

Environmental reasons are related to ecological concern and the sustainable aspects of natural

burial. These reasons were significantly less common than the other two categories, but did get mentioned occasionally in the form of ideas about recycling. Some participants indicated that they found it important to recycle basic materials such as plastics and glass, and similarly felt that their body would contribute to the environment if buried naturally (participant 1). This idea of contributing to nature in itself has an underlying sentimental layer and was also encountered in the study by Davies and Rumble (2012). A lot of participants mentioned the 'cradle to cradle' theory, after a book on sustainable design by William McDonough and Michael Braungart (2002). The idea is to design objects based on natural processes in which materials are seen as nutrients. This element also comes back in natural burial, for example in the innovative sustainable coffins.

One of the crucial elements regarding the environmental reasons is that the sustainable choices are all interconnected. This was exemplified by one of the participants who had arranged her mother's funeral at Hillig Meer (participant 4). The body was buried in a coffin made from woven reed and family and friends were asked to bring only wild flowers without cellophane wrapping. They chose a card made from paper which contained seeds that would grow into edible violets if the card would be planted in a garden. All these factors are sustainable, but the participant indicated that she only realized this when people mentioned it to her later. She explained that when she came across the site, it felt right to her because she was sure that it would suit her mother who had loved nature. All other choices followed from either the rules or the general atmosphere of the site, everything fit together but nothing was thought out from an ideological point of view. This does not mean that participants are not aware or do not appreciate the environmental aspects of natural burial, it is perceived as added value by many. It was not the main reason for anyone I spoke to, but 7 out of 41 people who completed the survey did indicate that sustainability was their main motivation for wanting a natural burial.

Interestingly, conversations with the management of Bergerbos by Klaassens and Groote (2011) indicated that they felt like people did not come there for ecological reasons because they were not 'truly green', but rather because of their love for nature (235). This relates back to Davies' (2010) original concept of life styles and death styles. That people are not necessarily concerned with sustainability during their life in this case does not mean that they disregard these aspects of natural burial. It is clear that sustainable choices automatically follow from the choice for a natural burial site. Whether or not the participants consciously consider the environmental aspects, their love for nature also means that they do not want to

leave a negative impact on an area.⁹ Participants indicated that they found it ‘ridiculous’ if people wanted to leave ornaments and markings on a natural burial site, even if they had not been aware of these regulations before the question was asked. It seemed like common sense to them that people should not put jewelry, polished wood, copper or brass coffin decorations and other artificial materials in the ground in such a natural area. Even when they were fond of such items in life, they found it normal that this was not allowed on a natural burial site.

3.3 Practical reasons

Stressing the importance of the third category, practical reasons, is one of the main contributions of this study to the existing literature on natural burial. Part of these reasons have also been described by Davies and Rumble (2012), but I found them to be so important to the participants that they warrant a separate category. These reasons are especially interesting because they are partially unique to the Dutch case, but may also be applicable to other densely populated areas with limited space for graves. Most of these reasons also have a sentimental undertone, but are of a practical nature.

A crucial aspect of natural burial sites is the fact that grave rights are eternal and the remains will not be exhumed. On a regular cemetery, it is common for a family to buy a grave for ten years after which the rights can either be prolonged for another period or the remains will be reburied in a collection grave, after which the grave can be re-used. All respondents found it a very unpleasant or even disturbing thought that their remains would be moved after a certain amount of time, which again is an emotional-based motivation behind the practical choice for an eternal grave. This way, they can avoid being a burden on their partner or children, both financially and in terms of making the decision every decade. This in turn prevents their loved ones from feeling guilty over not wanting or being able to prolong the grave rights. A second, related aspect is the maintenance of the grave. Since there are no permanent markers and nature will care for the grave, there is no need to clean a headstone or remove dead flowers for example. In fact, maintaining the grave is not allowed at natural burial sites. Some sites allow planting some plants or flowers from a specific list to a degree, as long as the area maintains a natural look. People found the thought of a decayed or neglected grave unpleasant, which can be prevented by the choice for a natural burial. Both of these aspects were especially relevant to the people who had no children or whose children

⁹ The long-term environmental impact of natural burial on an area remains largely unknown. While some research institutions such as Alterra and activist groups have been critical about the high grave density for example, the sites have different views (Molenaar, Mennen and Kirstenkas 2009). Participants believe natural burial is sustainable based on the advertisements.

lived far away.

Interestingly, the practical reasons are also the main concern for many people. Because graves are eternal, the grave rights are more expensive than at a regular site. However, as one of the employees at Weverslo indicated, when you renew grave rights every ten years for one hundred years you arrive at the same costs at most locations (Ron Bosmans, personal communication, April 11 2016). Since this is a one-time purchase and quite an investment for some people, it is currently not an accessible option for everyone. Another aspect is the low amount of sites and lack of sites in the most densely populated areas where the demand is highest. Two participants indicated that they wanted to be buried close to their hometown, because they wanted their relatives to be able to visit the grave (participant 2 and participant 3, personal communication, April 9 2016). Another concern was the lack of paved paths in the forest or field, making it more difficult for elderly people to reach a grave. A clear division between people can be seen with regards to this point, namely those who attach value to the grave as a site for memorialization and those who do not. The latter choose natural burial purely for the concept and are less concerned with the practicalities such as accessibility. The importance of the physical grave is an interesting concept to consider in this study, and will be discussed in the next section.

3.4 Discussion

When looking at the language that participants use when describing the reasons why they are interested in natural burial, it becomes clear that spiritual ideas play a role in their perception of death. As noted before, this can be seen from the way they describe lying in a grave, as if they could experience the location after their death. Another concept that came up in the interviews is that of the soul. Some participants expressed their views on death and dying in dualist terms, describing that their body belongs in nature but the soul might go to another dimension (participants 2, 5 and 6). This is interesting because it conflicts with the idea that the location could be perceived from the perspective of the body after death, as the soul would have left it and one would expect descriptions to involve looking down from above. Afterlife ideas that seem to be based in a Christian view, possibly because of the religious upbringing of five of the participants, are presented alongside ideas on nature as a force or personifications such as Mother Nature.

A second consideration that is related to these dualist expressions is that some participants felt that they might in some way experience their funeral. In this case they do seem to feel as if they would look down on the situation, rather than perceive it from their

body. On a more sentimental level, all participants indicated that their wishes for the funeral should not be too specific. They considered it important that the loved ones who have to endure the ceremony feel comfortable, and that they do not experience too much pressure to 'get it right.' In this sense the participants detached themselves from the ceremony again, while they had specific ideas in mind they did not want to put too much of those on paper and did not mind their loved ones making decisions. This is interesting, because the participants felt very strongly about their choice for natural burial and did not want to leave the form of body disposal open to their family's wishes, which indicates that not all aspects related to the funeral are open for discussion.

A distinction must be made between the choice of a person and the choices made by their loved ones. While they are often seen as the same, they can be vastly different. It is likely that family members are determined to carry out the last wishes of the deceased regardless of their own opinions. Especially in the case of natural burial which not many people have experience with, this could lead to them feeling uncomfortable with the idea later on if the procedures have not been accurately explained to them. When discussing the regulations surrounding the marking of graves with the participants during interviews, they were asked whether they could imagine that some bereaved find this difficult. The answer was often "then they should have just gone somewhere else" which is not possible after the burial (participant 1 and participant 6, personal communication, April 8 2016). This is also an argument that Nugteren makes, with regard to natural burial sites feeling desolate. Natural burial is generally a decision of individuals for themselves, not a choice that the bereaved make for the deceased, which could lead to the negative sentiments that Nugteren describes (86). However, the participants in this study who had experience with natural burial all made the decisions as a family or group of close friends. Since natural burial is often chosen and arranged by people far before their death, family members have a chance to be closely involved in the process. In this case, they are made aware of the regulations. It can be assumed that the people who are properly informed are not likely to feel uncomfortable with natural burial and the lack of marking at the grave that comes with it.

A final consideration with regards to these categories is whether participants find the physical grave important or not. Some were raised with the idea that graves have to be visited and maintained regularly. They attached value to the graves of other people and expected their family to want to visit theirs (participants 2, 3 and 6). Likewise, those who never visited other graves did not expect people to come to theirs either (participant 4). Natural burial was therefore attractive to them because nature would take care of the maintenance of the grave,

as mentioned under the practical reasons. Another related aspect was that two participants who had buried a loved one on a natural burial site felt that they were buried in the area as a whole, rather than one specific location. While they stand still at that particular grave, they walk around the site to remember the person. Memorialization and ritualization at natural burial sites will be discussed in section 5.2.

4. Reasons for offering natural burial

As can be seen from the previous chapter, the reasons why people are interested in natural burial vary greatly but can broadly be categorized in three different groups. Another aspect that is important to consider when attempting to understand the current growth of the practice is why sites offer natural burial. It is important to consider this perspective in addition to personal motivations for choosing natural burial because the trend would not exist if the level of supply did not grow along with the demand. It might even be the case that the number of sites is increasing much faster than the need for additional natural burial space, because it is seen as a source of income. I have hypothesized that the reasons to offer burial on a site's grounds are different from the reasons why people want to be buried there. While the main funeral directing companies do not own any sites, their advertisement is important to make people familiar with the concept in the short period they spend with their customers. There are also companies dedicated solely to natural burial, one of which will be considered here. Finally, employees from four different sites have shared their insights on the practice. In the last sub-section, the reasons for demand and supply are compared.

4.1 Funeral directing companies

Of the three biggest funeral directing companies in the Netherlands, Monuta pays the most attention to 'green funerals' on their website. They state that more and more people care about the environment, and that people who live a sustainable life also want a sustainable funeral. They offer environmentally friendly alternatives to almost any component of a funeral and emphasize the preservation and development of nature on the official sites. They also have three cemeteries with a 'natural' appearance that resemble a park, but where graves are still lined up in a row and marked with a traditional headstone ("Wat is natuurbegraven?" n.d.). This indicates that they make a distinction between natural burial for people who do this because of an ecological concern and eternal grave rest, and people who simply want to be buried in a natural setting. Yarden does not have an elaborate section on natural burial, but advertises their own site IJsselhof as providing the opportunity to choose for regular or natural burial, both in an artificial park. On their website they state that the deceased is buried in 'free' nature, from the underlying thought that what comes from nature should be given back to it as well ("Duurzaam begraven," 2015). The third biggest funeral directing business, DELA, states that a choice for natural burial equals a choice for "rest and contributing to nature preservation," combining sentimental reasons with sustainability. This continues throughout the rest of the section, which they called 'Under a favorite tree or in an open field,'

elaborating on the comfort and support that nature can bring because it will always continue, and their efforts to make every grave blend in with nature as soon as possible to support development, as well as the minimal environmental impact (“Natuurbegraven, eeuwige rust,” n.d.).

Generally, all three companies indicate that natural burial is a ritual that has been rediscovered because of people’s growing concern for the environment. From their website texts, it can be seen that funeral directing companies want to address multiple sets of reasons why someone could want a natural burial, which in turn is likely to reflect their experiences with wishes of customers. Even though these companies do not own any natural burial sites, their knowledge of the existing sites is important for the spread of the concept. When funeral directors promote natural burial as an option to families who do not have specific ideas on what the deceased wanted, this might become a more popular choice next to regular burial and cremation. However, it must be noted that most people who are interested in natural burial make a conscious choice to reserve a grave during their life. From the interviews with employees of natural burial sites it became clear that the vast majority of their customers has already made arrangements, it rarely happens that a family makes this choice after their loved one has passed away. Many funeral directors do not see natural burial as a popular alternative yet. An employee from Weverslo notes that some funeral directors he spoke to find the emphasis on nature too great, while the focus in their work is truly on the deceased and their families (Bosmans 2016). This balance between people and nature is crucial when offering natural burial, as will become clear in the next sections.

4.2 Natuurbegraven Nederland and Natuurmonumenten¹⁰

In an interview with the natural burial coordinator at Natuurmonumenten, she described how their involvement in this practice started (Claudia Majoor, personal communication, May 9 2016). Members of the organization had questions related to their interest in natural burial increasingly often, but Natuurmonumenten could not offer it themselves because their primary function is to ensure the protection of nature. However, since they found it a good initiative which they wanted to support, they started looking for a partner organization to handle the exploitation of the sites. The partnership with Natuurbegraven Nederland was established in 2014, and started from a mutual ideology and benefit. The money that is acquired through their involvement in natural burial is used to continue their primary work, namely protecting, buying and restoring nature. This is also a main motivation behind their

¹⁰ All data in the following sections comes from the cited interviews, unless otherwise indicated.

partnership with Natuurbegraven Nederland.

The role of Natuurmonumenten in the process is limited to the thorough evaluation of grounds they own by archaeologists, hydrologists, ecologists and other professionals involved, after which the procedures with the local government and neighbors start when a site is considered suitable. Natuurbegraven Nederland regulates the daily operations and funerals until a site is full. Ownership of the site then returns to Natuurmonumenten so they can continue preserving the site. The aim is to open a site in each province, resulting in ten to fifteen sites to be established through this partnership. While the largest demand is in the west of the country which is the most densely populated, this is also the place where it is most difficult to create a site because of the groundwater levels and the lack of space.

Natuurmonumenten considers it of great importance that their members are well informed about their involvement in natural burial. Since their primary goal is to protect and create nature, some people feel that they should not be involved in such practices which undoubtedly have some impact on the sites. One of the representatives of Natuurmonumenten stated that customer service is important in this matter, as most people who call them have criticisms that stem from ignorance. Education and clarity on why they are involved and what exactly happens at a designated natural burial site is therefore essential. Other people who have problems with natural burial simply do not like the idea of it, they find it scary or dirty to walk in an area with graves. Death and everything that surrounds it brings up many different emotions in people, so some resistance is understandable and to be expected in the future as well.

4.3 Brana and the four participating sites

The most important reason for the foundation of the sector organization Brana was to ensure the quality of care for nature in relation to offering natural burial, as well as provide clear guidelines for guaranteeing eternal grave rest beyond the exploitation of the sites. There are currently four members, but this number is expected to grow as Natuurbegraven Nederland and other individuals open up sites that fulfill the criteria. The United Kingdom also has a sector organization, the Association of Natural Burial Grounds (ANBG). They have devised a code of conduct that each site that wishes to join the association must abide by (“ANBG Code of Conduct,” n.d.). Brana also has such a code of conduct, but is more elaborate in their expectations considering nature, the type of grave rights and grave markings (“Brana gedragscode” n.d.). An employee of Weverslo noted that there might be a divide between Brana and non-Brana sites in the future (Bosmans 2016). As more sites open their doors and

the options for people to choose from keep growing, people might select a site based on different considerations such as rules, location and nature development plan. All sites are very different in terms of nature, motivation and background, and have different stories on how they started and consequently why they offer natural burial. In the next four sub-sections, the unique points of the four sites will be explored, after which the common aspects are highlighted.

4.3.1 Heidepol

Heidepol was founded in 2012 by the group of entrepreneurs who started *Natuurbegraven Nederland* (Riny Bergervoet, personal communication, March 29 2016). The site borders the largest natural park in the country, the Veluwe. It was the first site of *Natuurbegraven Nederland* and of the participating sites, Heidepol is unique in its business structure. Their views and motivations are therefore slightly different from the other *Brana* sites, which are individual. Heidepol used to be private property that was closed off by fences and a gate. They pride themselves in giving this nature back to the public, which people are free to walk around in any time from dawn to sunset. Heidepol started with a very clear concept of what natural burial on their site would look like. Their slogan ‘Nature first, people central’ reflects their wish to put the environment on the highest level of importance, while the people remain a primary focus of the burial practices specifically. Burial should always be seen as a side activity, the main activity being nature conservation and protection. As became clear in an interview with the former location manager of Heidepol, Riny Bergervoet, it is sometimes tempting to choose for efficiency, but the concept and initial motivation and vision are guarded at all times.

Something that Heidepol values greatly is attention to detail. This can be seen from a few different aspects, for example the markings they allow on the graves. People can choose a flat disc of one of the trees cut down from the premises. The text can be chosen by the family, but the engraving is done by Heidepol themselves in order to ensure uniformity. This prevents people from adding all kinds of figures which could expand to people leaving items at the grave. The only thing they allow is some cut flowers which can remain there for a few days before the staff removes them. Another form of detail is the clothing that the employees wear. Contrary to most funeral directors who wear a suit, Heidepol staff wears more casual outfits to keep the distance between them and their customers small and the relationships familiar. They know most people by name and make sure they stay well connected.

Like the other sites, Heidepol is very engaged in making sure that their property

remains a natural site for future generations by providing eternal grave rest that is registered with a notary in case of bankruptcy of the company. The eternal grave rights furthermore ensure that the area can remain nature forever, since it is practically impossible for a city, province or the government to discontinue the rights from a legal point of view. What makes Heidepol unique is that new nature is also actively developed there, for example with a project to create new moorland. While natural burial is the method of body disposal that has the lowest impact on the environment so far, it is not without consequences for nature, as Heidepol openly admits. One way in which they compensate for natural burial is a fund that they put money towards from each purchased grave. The new nature that is then developed or bought elsewhere is not meant for natural burial, but purely to contribute to nature preservation across the country. Heidepol takes sustainability very seriously in general, since their employees live in nearby villages and drive electric cars for example.

4.3.2 Hillig Meer

Hillig Meer is a natural area that has always existed as such, with the exception of a part which has been used for agriculture in the past (Marc Hesp, personal communication, April 7 2016). The burial activities were started in 2013 by Dolf van der Weij and Annetje Braat to ensure the continuation of public access to the area, since it contains many important historical features. For example, there are multiple ruins from the last and second-last ice age, which they have emphasized by planting a forest around them. There are a number of tumuli located on the site, one of which contained remains from 5000 years ago, meaning that the site has a long history of burial. Furthermore, there is a cave that was used as a shelter for people in hiding during World War II, that many schools from the area come to visit. Education about the environmental and historical features is therefore an important aspect of the vision of Hillig Meer.

Natural burial was added due to demand in addition to fitting in with their overall goals for the natural site. Among these goals are the strengthening and protection of nature by means of their development programs. New trees and a variety of smaller plants were planted on the depleted agricultural ground to diversify the area. Other goals are more societally oriented, such as the re-integration of people in nature and the promotion of the importance of nature in general. The area is used for the broader purpose of teaching people about what nature is and why conservation is crucial. Natural burial is a literal way to connect people with nature, and also helps collect funds to be able to realize the other goals. Lastly, as is the case for Heidepol as well, it is a means to ensure their site and its valuable features will

remain accessible in the future.

A final distinguishing aspect of Hillig Meer is the sense of community. Because of their contributions to educational projects, the site is well-connected with schools in the surrounding villages. Furthermore, they attach great value to being a good neighbor. Their local volunteers and positive relationships with institutions in the area make the support for the burial practices great, especially relative to some other sites where the establishment of a natural burial site has been a long and difficult process, such as the new sites of Natuurbegraven Nederland and Natuurmonumenten in Heeze and Schaik (Bergervoet 2016).

4.3.3 Weverslo

When Gé and Els Peterink bought a house in a woodland area, the real estate agent asked them if they also wanted to purchase the adjacent hectares of forest (Bosmans 2016). Els Peterink had heard about natural burial before and after an excursion to the United Kingdom they decided to start the natural burial site Weverslo. This situation is very different from the other burial sites, as most already existed as nature but needed a stable source of financial support. Since Weverslo was specifically bought to become a natural burial site, the underlying vision is very clear. Gé Peterink is also the founder of Brana, which means that Weverslo is how he as a director would like to see all natural burial sites in the country. Their vision is characterized by three elements, namely nature, burial and culture. As is the case with Heidepol and Hillig Meer, nature is the most important factor that needs to be taken into account. Burial comes second, and must not be taken lightly. As Bosmans notes, many sites choose to establish natural burial on their ground for financial reasons without realizing the heavy burden that is placed on the land. Burial comes with great responsibility, which Weverslo takes seriously. Similar to the other sites, a fund is established to ensure the continuation of the site even after the death of the founders, bankruptcy or when all the grave rights have been sold and no new income is generated. This means that natural burial is carried over to the next generations as well.

The third element, culture, is what makes Weverslo different from some other sites. They stress the importance of the site as a recreational area and not only a burial site through the organization of concerts, lectures, woodworking days, special walks and other events. For Weverslo, this is not only a way to stay connected to the family of those buried on the site, but also a way of familiarizing new people with the area. As Bosmans stresses, natural burial cannot be marketed aggressively. People either like it or they do not, it is a matter of feelings and emotions. Some people take a flyer home after they visited an event, but the people who

are truly interested will find their way to the site for more information. The connection to people is also exemplified by the small wooden statue in the shape of a leaf that is given to anyone who purchases a grave as a symbol of the bond between them and Weverslo. A larger glass version of this leaf can be found at the entrance of the site and contains the names of those who are buried there. It is their hope that people who put the statue in their house will tell their acquaintances about its meaning, and establish a network of ambassadors for the site. The same happens with anyone who attends a funeral, which is how the concept keeps growing as more people become familiar with the practice.

4.3.4 Bergerbos

Bergerbos is the oldest of the participating sites and also one of the oldest in the country. Previous Dutch studies on natural burial have therefore almost always included it, which is why there is more data about this site (Klaassens and Groote 2011, Nugteren 2014). Bergerbos was founded in 2003 by Huub Kluijtmans, who bought the ground without knowing the municipality had designated it for burial (Nacken 2016). As it was a forest, he started researching natural burial practices in the United Kingdom and the only existing Dutch site at the time. In the early stages, there was no clear protocol on what types of grave markings would be allowed. In order to start attracting customers he allowed people to place headstones and other monuments which are no longer allowed nowadays, but cannot be removed either. This creates a difficult situation for the employees of Bergerbos. When giving potential customers guided tours, they have to be clear about the type of monuments that are not allowed anymore regardless of the existing monuments they see on the site. The rules and regulations are violated quite frequently by people who bring cultivated plants onto the grounds or leave small ornaments, statues and pictures by a grave. Bergerbos works with a system of wooden markers to indicate that people need to change the grave or the staff will remove any items themselves. This leads to discussions sometimes because people seem to attach great value to marking a grave even if they are aware of the regulations. A central gathering spot at the entrance for items that were removed from the grave enables people to take home what they left at the grave illegally. The staff furthermore hopes that this sends a clearer message than warning the people in person or with a marker.

Bergerbos has a different system for grave rights than the Brana sites. It resembles a regular cemetery in the sense that there are common graves and private graves. The common graves have a limited time for the grave rights, usually ten years which cannot be extended. After this period, the grave becomes available for a second burial on top of it. This may occur

right after the grave rights have expired or years later, depending on the demand. Contrary to a regular cemetery, the graves are not exhumed but holds up to three places. The graves are therefore essentially eternal, as is the case with the Brana sites, but multiple people can be buried in the same grave. Private graves can be bought for a chosen number of years, of which fifty years is the most common length. This length is seen as practical because it allows for enough time to bury a partner in the same grave and for children to come visit. Many of their customers feel that there is no need for an eternal grave because after their children or perhaps grandchildren, nobody will visit the grave anymore. It can therefore be seen from this site that it is not necessarily the aspect of eternity itself that is important to people, but mostly to not be exhumed.

At Bergerbos specifically, the older monuments might disappear over time depending on the grave rights that were bought. Little measures can already be taken to change as many graves as possible back to looking natural. For example, when a partner is buried in an existing grave, the name cannot be inscribed in the same monument. Most families then choose to remove the monument or the pictures in favor of a completely different marking that fits in with the new regulations. However, this is not the case with graves for only one person or those with very long grave rights. In this case, the management of Bergerbos fears that the monuments will remain there for a long time, which means this site will likely not become as natural as some other sites and as unmarked as they desire.

Customers used to come from all over the country in the early years because of the lack of other options. Nowadays most people come from the surrounding villages in the middle and south of the province of Limburg, as well as Germany. It is expected that growth is quite stable because while more people are becoming familiar with the concept, the supply also grows very fast. Especially in the east and south of the country where the ground is suitable for natural burial, a few sites are soon opening their doors and some more are still in the planning stages.

4.5 Perceived reasons for choosing natural burial

The employees of the different sites were asked about their experiences with customers. The reasons that they perceive as important for the choice of a natural burial are largely the same as the categories described in the previous chapters. Some reflections and further nuances will be examined here.

An employee at Bergerbos indicates that they often hear that people love nature in general and the atmosphere of the site specifically, which falls in the category of sentimental

reasons. Interestingly, he notes that people who choose one of the Brana sites with stricter regulations might “love nature more” than the people who come to Bergerbos, but this did not become clear from the interviews with participants (Nacken 2016). Practically speaking, the standard fear of being a burden on their children is mentioned frequently. At Heidepol the financial aspects were highlighted. After the economic crisis Bergervoet feels that people have a stronger urge to make sure that their children do not have to pay for their grave rights. While this is not specifically related to natural burial, the eternal grave rights are a relatively simple yet expensive way to ensure this. Furthermore, Natuurbegraven Nederland often hears people say that the nature site that Heidepol borders, the Veluwe, is connected to fond memories from childhood holidays and day trips. It is a central point in the country and nationally well-known. Lastly, only a small percentage of the people that come to Heidepol seem to consciously want to contribute to ensuring the development and protection of nature. This last aspect is also true of Weverslo, where people usually already have an intrinsic motivation to come to the site. They like the forest specifically or nature in general, like at Bergerbos. The bicycle route that passes by the forest is used frequently, which makes it so that many people become familiar with the area. Ron Bosmans from Weverslo notes that when thinking about all the consequences of regular burial, the reasons for choosing natural burial can be taken very far, for example not wanting to contribute to child labor in marble factories. Since the employees do not ask customers about their motivations, they cannot be sure what their exact reasons are. These reflections are therefore partially based on assumptions.

All sites indicate that a specific spot for a grave is usually chosen because it feels right or even because they are “led to it,” near or under a particular tree or some other distinguishing feature in the area (Hesp 2016). Another practical advantage of natural burial sites is that partners can be buried near each other even if one of them wants to be cremated. On regular cemeteries there are usually designated areas for urn burials and the scattering of ashes, which are separate from the traditional graves. Natural burial provides this freedom, but the participants did not mention this specifically during the interviews. Next to the environmental reasons for establishing a natural burial site, it can be seen that customers are glad that there is an alternative to regular burial that leaves more room for personal choices and a more informal atmosphere. The formality of regular burial and the strict rituals of church funerals are not appealing to the people who choose for a natural burial.

4.6 Relationship between supply and demand

When considering the previous two chapters, it can be seen that the reasons for offering and choosing a natural burial are not necessarily the same. While the reasons for the sites can be roughly classified using the same three categories, their focus lies with the environment. In this final section, the relationship between the supply and demand will be evaluated.

Employees of the different sites feel like the position came on their path, similarly to how participants felt that they came across natural burial for a reason. Such emotional and somewhat spiritual narratives can thus be found on both sides. The employees value the bonds with people who are interested, loved ones of those who are buried at the site and local neighbors. They invest time in forming and maintaining these relationships as part of their vision on natural burial. The regulations of the site are a careful balance between protecting nature and not interfering in a person's grieving process. In terms of the funerals themselves, sites find it important that customers get ample time for the ceremony and the burial without being on a strict schedule. However, all sites openly state that nature will always come first. For example, there is a badger set at Heidepol which is of great value to the site. They have established a safe zone around it so that no graves can be reserved there. Natuurmonumenten explained that when rare plants are spotted at a site, people cannot be buried there either. People who have already reserved a grave on such a spot might be asked to choose a different one. Natural burial as a practice therefore involves intensive care for both the environment and the customers.

When considering the reasons why people are interested in natural burial, the sentimental aspects form the most important category, and the motivations that fall under the environmental and practical categories have an emotional undertone as well. It can be seen that while the environment is the most important factor for the sites, this is not a main concern in the choice for natural burial. Among the participants in both the survey and the interviews, there were quite a few people who would rather be cremated than buried in a regular cemetery. This confirms the notion that sentimental and practical reasons outweigh the environmental impact, because cremation is just as polluting as regular burial (Keijzer, ten Broeke and Ansems, 2014). Furthermore, it is interesting that some participants found the idea of exhumation so upsetting that they would rather be cremated in order to prevent this. It is important for sites to realize where the strengths of natural burial lie in the eyes of their customers so they can highlight these.

While natural burial sites promote themselves quite elaborately, from the interviews it became clear that the people who had not experienced a natural burial or visited a site did not

fully understand what the concept entails. People are not always aware of the fact that by buying a natural grave, they are contributing to the protection and development of nature. Perhaps this is because in their promotional materials sites advertise the sentimental reasons since they know from experience with customers that these are important factors. Sites also do not emphasize the strict rules surrounding the marking of graves outside of personal communication with customers. Proper communication about these practicalities help limit negative experiences that stem from unknowingness. The fact that people were willing to participate in this study based on their personal associations with the concept of natural burial without knowing what it entails shows that the idea is spreading. People who are genuinely interested in having a natural burial will therefore find their way to the appropriate sources of information when they are ready.

5. Understanding the trend

The reasons why people are interested in natural burial and the motivations of sites to offer it provide important insights into why the practice is such a fast-growing trend in the Netherlands. In this chapter, I will present reflections on concepts surrounding natural burial and draw the different findings together. Based on the analysis of Nugteren, natural burial may seem anonymous, impersonal and desolate, but after considering the findings it can be concluded that natural burial is not what it seems. The interview responses show that natural burial comes with different perceptions on burial, ritualization, personalization and death in itself, namely as highly personalized, familiar and controllable. When perceived this way, natural burial fits in with the current trends in death studies research.

5.1 Religious and personal identity

Some observations about the link between spirituality and interest in natural burial have already been presented in earlier sections. An additional finding from the interviews is the importance of the Catholic Church in the southern Netherlands specifically. Both Bergerbos, Weverslo and one participant mentioned that natural burial is an expression of people wanting to break away from the formality and traditions of the church. This is inherently connected with the scandals that have come to light in recent years. The participant felt that the church had betrayed her, which was one of the reasons why she did not want to be buried in a consecrated cemetery next to a church (participant 2). Interestingly, she still wanted a Gregorian mass in the church at her funeral because she felt that this was part of her identity nonetheless. These sentiments are heard relatively frequently at Bergerbos and Weverslo, but

did not come up in interviews with other sites. This is likely because there are already many cemeteries outside of the church walls that people have the option to go to, and other Christian denominations have not encountered any large scale scandals which have led to such negative sentiments.

Identity is a factor that has been hypothesized to be of great influence on the choice for natural burial, such as Davies' ideas on the relationship between life style and death style. While the life styles of participants were not always explicitly addressed, some mentioned that they try to recycle for example. I have established that environmental reasons are not a main concern to most people who are interested in natural burial, so we must look at the consequences of this statement. Natural burial is not a choice of people who live sustainable lives so they can leave a small environmental impact in their deaths. It has been argued that people do not live sustainable lives, but want to be buried in an ecologically friendly manner to compensate for their life style (Nugteren 2014, 94). No evidence for this was found in the interviews, because people valued the sentimental and practical reasons more. This leaves us with two options: life style and death style have nothing to do with each other, or the styles need to be considered in sentimental terms. I believe that the latter is the most plausible. During the interviews, participants expressed that they are considering natural burial because "it fits them." Employees of sites used phrases such as "it is important to stay close to a person (Bergervoet 2016)." These statements indicate that natural burial matches with one's life style. Elements that have come up include not being fond of formalities, not valuing material wealth and loving nature. It can be concluded that for the participants, their death style is an extension of their life style indeed, not in the environmental sense but in the context of sentimental reasons and personal identity.

A final consideration with regards to identity is related to the technological aspects of natural burial. There are two elements to be considered, the high-tech GPS systems and the social media profiling of burial sites. As I mentioned before, an important feature of natural burial is being able to select a grave before one's death. The GPS coordinates of the grave are then registered with a notary, so that the spot is reserved. The grave markings made of natural materials will eventually disappear, making the coordinates the only way to locate the grave. *Natuurmonumenten* indicates that there is a mobile phone app for Heidepol under development so that visitors can navigate the site by themselves (Majoer 2016). These technological developments seem to stand in contrast with the natural and 'back to basics', no fuss identity of sites. At the same time, these contrasts can strengthen each other because nature can be experienced highly personally in this way. Two of the younger participants

found the idea that their loved ones would go looking for their grave with a GPS app very entertaining (participants 5 and 6). Finally, the identity of sites is connected to their social media presence as well. By no means do they only target older generations, even though that is their primary group of customers. Regular cemeteries do not usually have a Facebook page where they post updates about events. Natural burial sites also frequently make use of testimonies on their social media pages and websites. This way, natural burial becomes an experience in and of itself, as well as a particular way to experience nature.

5.2 Ritualization

As I have shown throughout this thesis, natural burial sites have a different atmosphere than regular cemeteries. This has resulted in a less formal structure of the funerals themselves as well, and has led to different ways of ritualization. The ritualization can be considered from three different perspectives: from the facilities and events at sites, from the way people envision their funerals and from the actual graves.

In the previous chapter the rules about marking graves were outlined. For natural burial sites, this is a constant negotiation between maintaining the natural look of the area as much as possible and letting people grieve in the way that suits them. This is why a collection area for illegal items has been established at almost all natural burial sites. Especially at Bergerbos, where they allowed a lot during the early years of the site, this collection area is full of small white statues with hearts and angels, picture frames, glass ornaments, flower baskets and other decorations that are no longer allowed. While people can collect their items from that spot within a certain time frame, this does not always happen. This cycle of leaving something by a grave, having it removed and either taking it back home or letting Bergerbos dispose of it can be seen as a ritual in itself. Bergerbos has three other facilities for ritual use that must be mentioned here. The first is a small chapel-like structure at the entrance of the site where candles can be lit. This evolved out of people bringing candlesticks to leave at graves, which is dangerous in a forest. They collected them and put them by the entrance, where people kept adding more candlesticks until Bergerbos decided to create a more organized place for people to light candles because there was clearly a need for this. Now one specific type of candle is sold that people can write messages on as well. These candles are typically Catholic in a red or white glass container, which is interesting given the negative attitudes toward the Catholic Church in the south. The wall of this structure has gaps in it where people can leave notes. Bergerbos also has a mailbox where people can leave mail for the deceased symbolically, as the letters do not get opened. Finally, they have a large swing in

the middle of the forest which is used frequently by both children and adults. While for children this may be a playground, adults find comfort in using the swing while remembering their loved one.

Other sites also have specific ritual facilities. Heidepol has a small field designated for prematurely born babies with no legal status. Regular cemeteries do not always have facilities for such small graves, especially when the baby does not have to be buried according to Dutch law (“Wet op de lijkbezorging” n.d.). Heidepol wanted to offer parents who were grieving the loss of their baby an appropriate space to bury their baby, which they call the butterfly field. Some parents who visit the grave put flowers on all other graves in the field as well, creating a sense of shared loss and understanding. Both Weverslo and Hillig Meer have meditation paths. At Hillig Meer this is in the form of trees planted in a spiral around one of the ice age ruins, where they organize special walks. Weverslo has a route through the forest with different stops, where people can sit on a bench and read a text. The texts are usually poems or excerpts from stories, which they change regularly based on specific themes.

The way people envision the rituals and practices at a natural burial as opposed to regular burial has not been documented in previous studies. The participants in this study can therefore present useful insights into new forms of ritualization within this context. Interestingly, participants want a ceremony that is largely the same as what is common during regular burials, involving music that they selected, personal speeches by friends and family and perhaps a projection of photos on a screen. They attach great value to these personalized elements. One participant noted that “everyone used to have to wear black [...] and now everyone has to celebrate life. Both make me think, do whatever feels normal. But to each their own (participant 1).” This indicates that formal, traditional funerals and the celebratory humanist funerals are perceived as two extremes. The funeral with personal elements as she envisioned it would be somewhere in between. Some participants spoke from experience with funerals that they found awkward, in which the deceased was described in a way that they did not recognize. Personal touches such as speeches were associated with warmth and comfort. Speeches by priests or reverends who had no intense bond with a person during life can come across as impersonal, inauthentic and sometimes even embarrassing. Food and drinks after the ceremony are also considered important, but many did not want the standard coffee and cake that is usually offered. Natural burial sites offer many options for this. Since a family typically gets half a day for the ceremony and the burial, there is room for people to spend time together after the funeral. Some people bring wine, picnic baskets, home-made food or hire a caterer. Heidepol even has a small kitchen that people are free to use. Some participants were

unaware of these possibilities, but were enthusiastic to find out about these options since it fit with their view of an informal, personalized funeral.

The ritualization by the graves themselves is distinctly different from regular cemeteries. The participants were asked what they do when they visit a regular grave and a natural grave, or what they would do if they did not know anyone buried on a natural burial site. All participants said they would walk around the area to remember their loved one, rather than only standing still at one grave. There is a recreational aspect to natural burial sites since it is also accessible to the general public for leisure activities. Visits to natural burial sites also last longer on average because of this (Klaassens and Groote 2011, 235). Most people indicated that they wanted to do something tangible. At a regular grave, they would clean the headstone and take care of the plants and flowers. Some also wanted to leave plants by a natural grave, but were not aware of the fact that this is usually not allowed. An employee at Bergerbos hypothesized that this need to care for a grave is greater in people who took care of their loved one intensively during the last years of their life (Nacken 2016). Sites indicate that visitors often use branches of trees to mark the grave with a certain pattern, or they remove the leaves from a grave. Most sites allow this to some extent, and just restore the natural look by scattering the branches and leaves again when a grave becomes too noticeable within the environment.

5.3 De-personalization or de-materialization?

It can be seen that these developments truly fit in with the trend of highly personalized funerals, because the customers have great control over the way that the rituals are performed (Venbrux et al. 2009). According to Tony Walter (1994), neo-modern death is characterized by personal choices, autonomy, a strong sense of an inner journey and the self (48). While he has only written about death in general and not natural burial, his theory can still be applied to the practice. The focus on identity and personal values in death studies on the one hand fits with natural burial very well, because it is possible to make a conscious choice for a particular spot in nature. On the other hand, natural burial seemingly goes against the trend of a personalized death. Graves are marked naturally because of the idea that one becomes part of the larger whole: nature itself. In a society where personal identity is deemed so important, it is very strange that people would want to give up this identification at death. However, as I have mentioned before, in this regard natural burial is not what it seems.

People who choose a natural burial for themselves may be very fond of this sense of anonymity and giving themselves back to nature, where their body will nourish the ground

and plants will grow, as is characteristic for sentimental reasons. While a funeral is mostly concerned with the wishes of the deceased and this project focuses on their reasons for a certain choice, the impact on the bereaved can be significant as well. As can be seen from the analysis by Nugteren (2014), family members are not always prepared for the lack of identification of a grave and their inability to leave items at the spot (98). It is furthermore interesting that people do not want to be a burden on their loved ones once they are dead, as Davies and Rumble (2012) have found among participants in their study, people just want to “slip away quietly (68).” Natural burial plots indeed do not require maintenance, but sometimes the bereaved would like a physical place to maintain. It can be seen that there are different processes involved for both people who choose natural burial as well as their family members. The participants in this study who are interested in natural burial attach value to a personalized ceremony and a carefully selected grave, but do not care about the type of coffin or marking in their grave. It is personalized and de-materialized. For their family members, it might seem de-personalized because of the lack of identification at the grave itself, and they would rather have something material to hold on to as can be seen from the desire to leave objects or plant flowers at a grave.

Graves are not always marked with a name, but this is often a choice of the family rather than the deceased. All sites allow the marking of graves with a name, as long as the item fits their guidelines. The dead will therefore never be left ‘nameless’ unless it is by choice of the family, contrary to what Nugteren notes in her article. Two of the participants in this study left the grave of their loved one nameless intentionally. One of them took a rock from the backyard of her deceased mother, which carried a special meaning to her and her family (participant 4). The other intended on taking a rock from one of the destinations she and her husband used to visit on vacation, and she felt that carving their names in that rock would not be necessary (participant 1). At the woodworking days at Weverslo people can carve wood for different purposes, either to take home or to leave at a grave. There are people who create a marking for their own future grave or the grave of a loved one. This is a highly personalized but still natural way of marking a grave that does not necessarily involve a name, but carries meaning for the family. Furthermore, both Bergerbos and Weverslo have a central monument at their entrance in which all the names of the people who are buried at the site are engraved. The names and corresponding locations are also stored digitally by the sites, a notary and a national database which means that they will always be somewhere, be it physically or online.

5.4 Taking control of death

One of the most important findings from this study in terms of the consequences of a choice for natural burial is that people who are interested in natural burial seem to have a specific view on their own death and dying in general. In the interviews, participants brought up multiple different aspects that were related to taking control over their own funeral arrangements and their preferred way of dying. The natural burial sites also find it important to give the control over a funeral back to the people, since it has become quite formalized in recent years. As I have shown earlier, the participants found traditional funerals artificial and did not want this for themselves. The informal character of natural burial appealed to them and allowed them to structure the other elements of a funeral around it. The agency is not with the funeral directors or the sites but truly with the families, more specifically with the person whose funeral it is.

Among some participants there was a strong sense of claiming control of death after not always having had control over their body during life. One survey respondent indicated that he had to take medication for diabetes for the majority of his life. The ability to choose his own grave gave him a sense of freedom and peace. Another respondent shared this sentiment, saying that “we can’t choose where we are born, at least let me choose where I die (participant 6).” This particular participant also had strong ideas about the way he wanted to die, namely by euthanasia or suicide at a point in life when he felt it has been enough. While this is somewhat extreme, the two older participants both had a euthanasia declaration and a do-not-resuscitate necklace (participants 1 and 2). With the current state of medical advances it is possible to keep people alive for a very long time, in varying conditions. Taking such measures are a way for participants to ensure they do not live past a certain point or in a bad condition.

These ideas on dying go hand in hand with arranging the practical aspects as well. One participant strongly urges people to arrange their death during their lives, and preferably when they are still healthy. In her view, death is not as emotionally laden as it becomes when someone is ill. Three participants had experienced a death in their family where the person had not made any arrangements. When such a death was not expected, participants found it logical that arrangements had not yet been made and said that it would always be proper as long as they acted from their hearts (participant 1). However, in two other cases the deaths came after a period of terminal illness. The participants had expected that arrangements had been made in this time, but this appeared not to be the case. They found this frustrating and somewhat “ridiculous” because it felt logical to them that a person should at least make their

basic wishes known to their loved ones, most importantly the choice for burial or cremation (participants 2 and 4). By choosing a natural burial people can also control the way their loved ones experience nature to some extent. Their choice for a particular spot for a grave was very important to the participants. They would choose or have chosen based on their feelings and emotions with regards to that particular spot in the area. This way, their loved ones will be able to experience nature the same way they did while choosing the grave. It also means that they will have to visit nature in order to visit the grave, which some participants see as a way to spread their own love for nature to their loved ones.

Lastly, it seems as if a choice for natural burial is paired with a certain perception of death. Especially the two older participants who had already finalized all the arrangements were still happy with their life but were also ready for death when their time would come (participants 1 and 2). There was a sense of familiarity with death because they found it a pleasant idea to know where exactly they would lie once they passed away. The ability to build up a connection with a site by visiting it or going to the events that are organized strengthens this familiarity with the grave and the site as a whole. More generally speaking, all participants had more or less specific thoughts about their death and funeral, regardless of their age. This is unsurprising because natural burial is almost always chosen personally during life, but furthermore indicates that people may be more involved with death, consider it more practically and do not necessarily fear it.

6. Conclusion

This thesis was set out to explore the reasoning behind offering and choosing a natural burial, and has identified three categories that cover the most important aspects, namely sentimental, environmental and practical reasons. This study has contributed to the limited existing literature on natural burial sites by providing more elaborate insights into the Dutch context, which was hypothesized to be different from the studies that have been conducted in the United Kingdom. It is important to study this topic because of the growing popularity of the practice in the Netherlands, with a rapid growth of the number of sites and a steadily increasing number of reservations being made. The appeal of natural burial to people and land owners has been outlined throughout this study. It has furthermore been shown that people who choose for natural burial have a particular view on death and dying that involves control and familiarity. The ritualization at natural burial sites was found to be different from traditional cemeteries because of the rules on marking graves and the recreational aspect of walking around the site to memorialize. In this concluding chapter, I will synthesize the

empirical and theoretical findings from this study. I will furthermore highlight the limitations and point to topics that can be considered in further studies.

Since few studies have made use of original empirical data, this study was largely based on a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with both natural burial sites and people who are interested in having such a burial. The research question consisted of two different parts: the reasons why natural burial is desired and offered and how the ritualization at sites is shaped. From the data it became clear that the reasons why people are interested in natural burial can be broadly grouped into three categories, often all interconnected and considered to be of varying importance. The motivations that fall under the first category of sentimental reasons are often mentioned first, and include factors such as a love for nature, a sense of belonging in nature and a desire to go back to where we came from. Participants all had a strong aversion to traditional cemeteries which were considered cold, too straight and too crowded, and some would rather be cremated than buried there. Environmental reasons were of secondary importance to all interview participants and most survey respondents. While most participants aimed to live sustainably, nature preservation and development were not a main concern to anyone. However, some specifically mentioned recycling, participating in the carbon cycle and cradle to cradle imagery as important to them, but these factors have an emotional undertone as well. While these two categories are also mentioned in other studies, I found the third category of practical reasons to be very important to the participants. This includes aspects such as eternal grave rest by which they can unburden their family and mostly their children from having to decide over and pay for the prolonging of the grave rights. This is related to strong feelings against exhumation, which is very common in the more densely populated areas of the country. Like some environmental reasons, these practical concerns are motivations are emotion-based as well.

The four natural burial sites that participated in this study all started for different reasons and with different visions and motivations, but they considered the sites in the United Kingdom as a point of departure. In some cases natural burial was added to an already existing area by the landowners to diversify income, in other cases the land was bought specifically to create a natural burial site. Regardless of these differences, the concept is largely seen and carried out the same, but a distinction can be made between Brana and non-Brana sites. The Brana sites, Hillig Meer, Weverslo and Heidepol, all indicated that nature comes first. They attach great value to the environmental aspects of natural burial and want to offer a sustainable way of body disposal, alongside more emotional desires to offer families a lot of freedom during a funeral, re-integrate people in nature and offer eternal grave rest. The

non-Brana site, Bergerbos, wants the forest to remain a natural look but attaches greater value to providing people with the opportunity to be buried however they want. All sites are generally well aware of the reasons why people are interested in being buried at their site, but this is not always the case the other way around. Many people do not realize that by choosing for natural burial, they contribute to the continued existence of the site, the development of new nature and protection of existing nature for future generations.

The second part of the research question pertains to ritualization at sites in general and by graves specifically. Contrary to the claim that people who choose for natural burial want to disappear anonymously in nature, I have found that participants still wish for a highly personalized funeral with speeches and music. The main difference between ritualization at regular and natural burials lies in the material aspect. The participants in this study did not want a polished casket with brass handles, a marble headstone or decorations by their grave. They were content with a simple wooden marker or an unworked rock from the site itself, their own backyard or a location that has meaning to them. While the engraving of names is indeed not as important, the marking still had meaning to them and their loved ones. They had no problems with the strict rules and regulations of natural burial sites regarding the marking of graves, and did not think their family would mind either. Many facilities for alternative ritualization are offered by the sites, such as specific collection areas for objects that are left by the grave, meditation paths and a wide variety of events to establish or maintain a connection with the site.

A final point for consideration is the particular perception of death in relation to natural burial. While not explicitly mentioned by all participants, control over how and where they are buried is important to them. This in turn creates a familiarity with their own death, when their wishes become concrete and a grave is reserved. Knowing that all arrangements have been made and having decided where exactly they are going to be buried gives rest and comfort, indicating a certain acceptance of and readiness for death when the time comes. This idea is strengthened by the euthanasia declarations and do-not-resuscitate necklaces that two participants had. This way, they have great control over their own death and do not have to live past a point where they no longer think it is necessary. It can therefore be seen from these participants that death is highly personal, controllable and familiarized through natural burial and the choices that surround it. Death is a part of life that should not be feared or shunned as a subject, but rather arranged practically so that one at least knows what will happen to their body afterwards.

While this study has mostly focused on empirical data, some contributions to previous

theories can be identified. This study has confirmed that natural burial as a practice fits in with the current trends in the field of death studies, most notably by Tony Walter's framework of postmodern attitudes towards death, as it is very personal and involves a sense of control over death. It has furthermore suggested a different understanding of Douglas Davies' life style and death style hypothesis. Rather than seeing natural burial as an extension of a sustainable life style, it should be considered an extension in the sense of emotional reasons. People loved being in nature during their lives and natural burial offers them a way to rest in nature forever after their death. Furthermore, participants were not fond of formalities and did not attach great value to material possessions. When looking at the work of Hannah Rumble, participants in this study did not want to "slip away quietly" or anonymously but mostly "slip away personally." While the desire for eternal grave rest is particularly important in the Dutch context because of the fear of being exhumed, the other reasons she identified in her British study are largely similar to those found in this study. Lastly, the two categories of light green and dark green reasons that Tineke Nugteren identified are indeed also found in this project. The aspects from the third category of practical reasons are not mentioned, which I have argued to be very important. The factors that she considers to lead to feelings of desolation, such as leaving the dead nameless and unprotected, can be prevented by involving a family in the decision and proper information.

The limitations of this study are mostly related to the sample size. While it is a suitable number for the size of this project, the variety in background of the participants can be seen as both positive and negative. It has led to many insights into the possible considerations and reasons to choose for natural burial, but it is unknown whether the differences in age, gender, socio-economic and religious background lead to a different reasoning. This study aimed to provide an overview of the considerations and the implications of a choice for natural burial, for which the sample was sufficient. Further study with a larger number of participants could provide more conclusive evidence for the claims I have made here. It would also be interesting to conduct a comparative study of natural burial in different countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. The environmental impact of the practice would also be worth studying, especially for policy makers in light of the expected growth of the trend. Although this study has shown that people are mostly interested in natural burial for sentimental and practical reasons, the environmental impact may ultimately have consequences for their choice. Lastly, further study on the relationship between the choice for natural burial and perceptions of death could provide new insights for the field of death studies, and the field of religion and ecology could benefit from more a more elaborate

analysis of the spiritual background to natural burial.

Natural burial is chosen for a variety of reasons which can be classified as sentimental, environmental and practical. I have shown that the sentimental reasons are the most important since these underlie the environmental and practical reasons as well, but it has to be acknowledged that no clearly defined boundaries can be drawn between the categories. The reasons for offering natural burial are partially financial and focus on the environmental aspects of body disposal. With this income they can ensure that they can keep protecting and developing nature on the site and that the area remains natural for future generations. Natural burial changes the way people ritualize at a grave, partially because they want to and partially because of the strict rules and regulations. Natural burial not only changes ritualization but also the way people perceive death. This study has contributed to a better understanding of natural burial as a trend in the Netherlands.

7. References

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List of personal communication

Interview with participant 1, April 21, 2016
Interview with participant 2, April 11, 2016
Interview with participant 3, April 9, 2016
Interview with participant 4, April 15, 2016
Interview with participant 5, April 9, 2016
Interview with participant 6, April 8, 2016
Interview with Jos Nacken, April 11, 2016 at Bergerbos in St. Odiliënberg.
Interview with Claudia Majoor, May 9, 2016 at Natuurmonumenten in ‘s-Gravenland.
Interview with Riny Bergervoet, March 29, 2016 at Heidepol in Arnhem.
Interview with Marc Hesp, April 7, 2016 at Hillig Meer in Eext.
Interview with Ron Bosmans, April 11, 2016 at Weverslo in Heide.

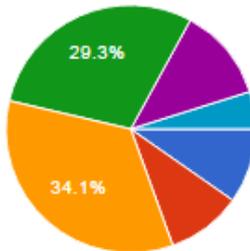
Cover photo

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Appendix A

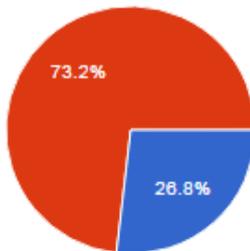
Persoonlijke gegevens

Wat is uw leeftijd?



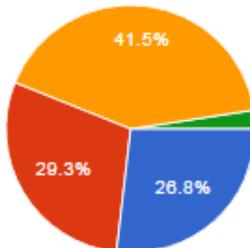
20-29 jaar	4	9.8%
30-39 jaar	4	9.8%
40-49 jaar	14	34.1%
50-59 jaar	12	29.3%
60-69 jaar	5	12.2%
70+ jaar	2	4.9%

Wat is uw geslacht?



man	11	26.8%
vrouw	30	73.2%

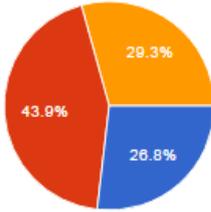
Beschouwt u uzelf als spiritueel of religieus?



Ja	11	26.8%
Nee	12	29.3%
Een beetje	17	41.5%
Weet ik niet	1	2.4%

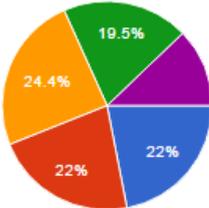
Natuurbegraafplaatsen

Hebt u wel eens een natuurbegraafplaats bezocht?



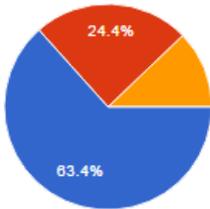
Nee, en dat ben ik voorlopig niet van plan	11	26.8%
Nee, maar dat ben ik wel van plan	18	43.9%
Ja	12	29.3%

Heeft u een natuurgraf gereserveerd?



Nee, daar ben ik nog niet aan toe	9	22%
Nee, ik wist niet dat dit kon	9	22%
Nee, maar in de toekomst ben ik dit wel van plan	10	24.4%
Nee (andere reden)	8	19.5%
Ja	5	12.2%

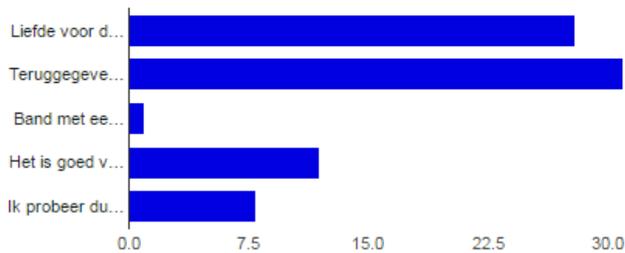
Zijn er mensen uit uw familie of vriendenkring in de natuur begraven?



Nee	26	63.4%
Ja	10	24.4%
Weet ik niet	5	12.2%

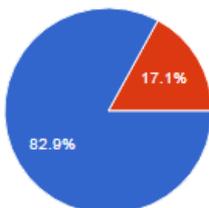
Redenen voor natuurbegraven

Welke van deze redenen spelen voor u mee?



Liefde voor de natuur	28	68.3%
Teruggegeven worden aan de natuur	31	75.6%
Band met een bepaald natuurgebied	1	2.4%
Het is goed voor het milieu	12	29.3%
Ik probeer duurzaam te leven	8	19.5%

Welke van deze redenen wegen voor u zwaarder?



Liefde voor natuur, aan de natuur teruggegeven worden, band met een bepaald gebied	34	82.9%
Het is duurzaam, goed voor het milieu	7	17.1%

Waarom spreekt een natuurbegravenis u aan?

- Mooie omgeving, geen gedoe met bijhouden voor de nabestaanden en ik hou van de natuur.
- Een crematie of begraven bij de kerk spreekt mij niet zo aan. Een mooi alternatief
- Mooi in de natuur, andere opties spreken niet aan
- Beetje lastig om te beschrijven. Heb in mijn leven veel gemoeten (diabetes) altijd alleen maar op mezelf letten. Ik zou graag rust willen heerlijk op een zacht stukje mos naar de zon kijken luisteren naar de vogels. Alle andere vormen van het einde vind ik niks vuur of in een kist. Ik zou graag in een lijk wade rustig onder een boom willen liggen.
- Eeuwige grafurst
- Terug naar de oorsprong van je basis, + natuurlijke, mooie omgeving
- Eenheid verbondenheid met natuur Leven en dood
- Eeuwige rust in de natuur
- Ik ga zelf niet naar het graf van mijn moeder maar zou het mooi hebben gevonden om een plek/gebied te hebben waar je zou kunnen wandelen. Iemand gedenken doe ik liever wandelend dan dat ik voor 1 plek blijf staan. Daarnaast vind ik het behoud van de natuur erg belangrijk dus waarom niet de twee combineren?
- You can be buried, but it is not all about the "grave site" ...it is not for environmental reasons, a regular graveyard is not my "style"...it is not about the nature/environment factor though. It seems like a far more productive way of dying, in the sense that you are contributing to the conservation of nature, instead of taking up more place but also a more peaceful death site. Furthermore, maybe it will stop governments from cutting down more trees.
- Next best thing na een illegale begravenis in de natuur op een locatie die ik zelf zou kiezen. Bovendien zie ik mezelf als een natuurlijk wezen en behoor ik na mijn dood ook naar de natuur terug te keren op een zo natuurlijk mogelijke wijze.
- Ik denk dat het echt mooi is om het lichaam terug te geven aan de natuur. Het is een natuurlijke manier om te begraven en ik vind het daarom echt een mooi en speciaal idee. Het idee dat het echt je laatste rustplaats is i.p.v. ooit uit je graf geruimd worden. Tevens het idee echt 1 te worden met de natuur.
- Anoniem, eeuwigdurend grafrecht, eenvoudig zonder monument
- Als het financieel haalbaar is wil ik op deze manier begraven worden. Op gewone begraafplaatsen worden de "resten" na een bepaalde periode opgegraven. Dat vind ik een onprettig idee. Vandaar dat ik gecremeerd wil worden als een natuurbegravenis niet haalbaar is.
- Het voelt beter aan dan op een rijtje te liggen op een verdrietige plek
- Mooi, rustig, niet een recht rijtje met graven
- Romantischer idee in de vrije natuur op een mooi plekje niet in een rijtje steen. Begraafplaats is in het donker eng. Teveel horror films erover.
- De rust, de schoonheid
- Eigenlijk nooit over nagedacht
- Straalt rust uit
- Lijkt me mooier dan op zo een standaard begraafplaats.
- Een 'gewone' begraafplaats voelt niet als een plaats waar ik op m'n plek ben. Te straight, zakelijk. Ik hou enorm van de natuur en ben daarnaast voorstander van zo natuurlijk mogelijk

leven.

-Geen zin om op een rijtje te liggen op een traditionele begraafplaats

-Als natuurliefhebber spreken de omgeving en de rust mij aan. De plek gaat daarna weer op in de natuur. Het is een plek waar je altijd naar toe kunt om op je eigen manier te gedenken. Je voelt je niet "bekeken" maar ervaart rust en ruimte.

-De rust en stilte. Een zijn met de natuur. En zeker niet in vakken verdeeld, zoals elders op de "normale" begraafplaatsen met marmeren grafstenen. Dat vind ik koud en kil.

-Terug naar de natuur. Nabestaanden hoeven niets te onderhouden. Gewoon een prachtig idee dat dit kan. Liefst in doek, lijkwade of Onora 'kist' die vergaat.

-Weer terug naar de aarde. Daar vergaat je lichaam. Geen poespas met gedenkstenen. Ik hou veel van de natuur, dus wat is er mooier dan daar begraven te mogen worden.

-Milieuvriendelijke manier. Past bij de cyclus van het leven.

-Simpel, je moet wat met je lichaam, crematie doet mij te veel denken aan Auschwitz en in een kist wordt het een vieze bedoening. Nu wordt je opgenomen in de aarde en help je mee de kringloop in stand te houden

-Terug naar de natuur; natuurlijk; mooi

-Geen onderhoud aan graf of grafmonument, opgaan in de natuur, eenmalig betalen en eeuwige rust.

-Daar ik ook erg veel houdt van de natuur, en mijn allerliefste man en zoon daar begraven liggen.

-Als je niet vanuit een Kerk begraven wil worden en niet gecremeerd is dit een goed alternatief

-De natuur is voor mij mijn dagelijkse vitaminen pil

-Omdat het me een vorm van teruggave aan de natuur lijkt

-Interesse naar de niet-religieuze ervaring van begraven, wat voor mij heel goed in de natuur kan. Ik schrijf zelf een paper over natuur begraven maar met betrekking van archeologische funeraire sites en het potentieel van hergebruik als natuurbegraafplaats. Deze tradities komen sterk overeen met pré-christelijke tradities, die ook wel degelijk religieus gebonden zijn maar voor mij veel meer interesse wekken dan de huidige religieuze begraafplaatsen. Hedendaagse begraafplaatsen zijn een standaard geworden en het is, duidelijk aan de hoge interesse ernaar, tijd voor alternatieven.

-Heel natuurlijk en terug naar de basis....

-Terug verbonden worden met natuur. Een pluspunt zou zijn indien het zou kunnen aansluiten bij een vroegere (archeologische) begraafplaats. Ook die verbinding met het verleden spreekt me aan.

Appendix B

Interview Guide Marissa Herder – Scriptie – Geïnteresseerden

Religieuze/spirituele achtergrond

- Beschouwt u uzelf als religieus of spiritueel?
- Bent u opgevoed met bepaalde ideeën met betrekking tot de dood?
- Hoe kijkt u daar nu tegen aan?
- Wat betekent de dood voor u (einde/begin etc.)?

Nadenken over eigen dood

- Denkt u wel eens concreet na over uw eigen dood?
- Heeft u uw wensen (formeel/informeel) op papier staan?

Natuurbegraven

- Hoe en wanneer kwam u voor het eerst in aanraking met het idee van natuurbegraven?
- In de vragenlijst omschreef u de redenen achter uw interesse voor natuurbegraven als volgt:
(...) Kunt u daar iets meer over vertellen?
- Wat lijkt u zo mooi aan natuurbegraven?
- Kunt u ook nadelen bedenken?

Effect op nabestaanden

- Weten uw nabestaanden van uw interesse voor natuurbegraven?
- Zo ja, hoe kijken zij er tegenaan? Weten ze wat het inhoudt?
- Zo nee, waarom niet?

Ritualisering (bij graf anderen/zelf)

- Hoe ziet u uw eigen uitvaart voor u? Op welke manier zou u willen dat mensen u herdenken?
- Welke rituelen vindt u belangrijk bij uw uitvaart?
- Hoe stelt u zich uw eigen natuurgraf voor?
- Hecht u waarde aan het graf van anderen? Kunt u een voorbeeld geven?
- Als een bekende van u in de natuur begraven zou zijn, zou u het graf dan bezoeken? Wat zou u daar doen?
- Bij natuurgraven mag (bijna) niets neergelegd worden, wat vindt u daarvan?
- Wat denkt u dat nabestaanden hiervan vinden?
- Een natuurgraf mag maar heel minimaal gemarkeerd worden (bijvoorbeeld met zwerfkei of boomschijf), maar het idee is dat graven zo anoniem mogelijk zijn. Hoe denkt u daarover?
- Wat denkt u dat nabestaanden hiervan vinden?

Appendix C

Interview Guide Marissa Herder – Scriptie – Begraafplaatsen

1. Hoe bent u in de uitvaartbranche terechtgekomen, en specifiek natuurbegraven?
2. Kunt u iets vertellen over de visie van de begraafplaats op het concept?
3. Wat zijn uw redenen om natuurbegraven aan te bieden?
4. Wat denkt u dat voor uw klanten de belangrijkste redenen zijn om een natuurbegrafenis te kiezen?
5. Hoe kiezen mensen voor een specifieke begraafplaats, en hoe helpt u daarbij?
6. Kunt u een omschrijving van uw klanten geven, wat voor mensen komen vaak bij u?
7. Kunt u iets vertellen over uw visie op de groei in populariteit van natuurbegraven, wat merkt u daarvan op de begraafplaats?