“Resting in Peace: Identity Construction at the Anglo-American Cemetery of Beirut”

Christine B. Lindner
University of Balamand, Lebanon
Christine.lindner@balamand.edu.lb

This paper will explore the historically porous and shifting nature of both the American and Arab identities in the Middle East through analyzing the Anglo-American Cemetery of Beirut. Founded in 1914, this space became the resting ground not only for British and American residents, as the name suggests, but a wide variety of individuals, including a number of Arabs and Armenians. These ‘Americans’ included the family of John Wortabet (an early teacher of medicine at AUB), the Abacarius family, as well as Wadi’a Ibrahim Said, the father of Edward Said and Jean Said Makdisi.

Investigating the reports of the Anglo-American Cemetery Association, consular and missionary reports, as well as the cemetery space itself, illuminates three important threads for discussion. Firstly, the American and the British identities in the region intertwined due to a history of shared language, culture and, particularly important in this case, religion. Secondly, the cemetery shed light onto the often overlooked community of long-term American residents in the region. Some families can be traced through numerous generations in the records, intertwining with American and British colleagues through marriage. What does it mean for these people, who spent most of their lives in the region, to be labeled as ‘American’? Conversely, the third strand of my paper will explore the individuals and families with non-Anglo-American backgrounds who were nevertheless buried here. While some may have been buried due to necessity (such as war or death during travel), others actively pursued the ‘American’ identity label. This was particularly true of Arab Protestants. Why did these individuals choose to be buried amongst ‘foreigners’, while many of their colleagues were laid to rest in Arab focused cemeteries? This paper will thus show that borders for Arab and American identities were shifting and permeable both in life and death.