Research Article

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Leaving one's mark: self-authorized commemorative practices in a rural semiotic landscape

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Abstract: This study introduces the concept of "self-authorized commemorative practices" to the analysis of semiotic landscapes. It aims to draw attention to commemorative practices by which individuals assert their presence within the semiotic landscape, beyond the influence of powerful authorities that typically determine the visible commemorative aspects of public space. The multimodal practices employed include the use of language, images and artefacts, and their emplacement in the semiotic landscapes. The study is based on two complete photographic inventories of all signage in public space in a rural community in northwest Germany, taken over a ten-year period, in addition to more than twenty years of participant observation. The findings reveal layers of self-authorized commemorative practices, often concealed in plain sight but discernible to the trained eye, interwoven with the local narratives associated with the semiotic landscape. Individuals, through their own means, leave lasting marks that commemorate their existence, achievements, deceased loved ones, or social traditions. These self-authorized practices contribute to the rich tapestry of the semiotic landscape, challenging and expanding our understanding of commemoration beyond the influence of traditional authorities.

Keywords: semiotic rural landscapes; commemorative practices; self-authorized commemorative practices

1 Introduction

Looking at the distribution of cultural tools (or mnemonic devices, e.g. Conway 2010: 443) applied for the purposes of remembering, an interesting observation can be made: in literature and story-telling, individual commemorative practices prevail, although they may feed into what is sometimes referred to as collective memories.[1] In contrast, when it comes to commemoration in the semiotic landscapes people inhabit or visit, those seem to be dominated by expressions of collective memories such as monuments, memorials, street names, remembrance plaques or dedicated buildings such as museums. They reflect socially constructed discourses which were hegemonic at a certain point in time, and they were designed, financed, and emplaced by bodies of power, influence, and authority. This study highlights the presence of commemorative signs in semiotic landscapes, created by individuals without official approval. It is guided by the following research questions:
How are self-authorized commemorative signs emplaced in the semiotic landscape?
What is the agency behind self-authorized commemorative practices?
Which discourses are transported by self-authorized commemorative signs??

1 The concept of 'collective memory' is highly contested within sociology and memory studies. As a minimal consensus it can be defined as "a form of memory that transcends individuals and is shared by a group" (Wertsch and Roediger 2008: 318).

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Based on two comprehensive photographic documentations of all signs in public space in a rural community in northwest Germany taken over a period of ten years, and two decades of participant observation, this study focuses on practices of individuals who emplace self-authorized commemorative signs in the semiotic landscapes they inhabit or visit. Self-authorized signs include those emplaced in breach of the law, also referred to as transgressive (see, for example, Reershemius 2021; Ziegler et al. 2018), for example graffiti or certain types of stickers (Reershemius 2019). In addition, in the context of commemorative discourse, self-authorized signs also encompass those emplaced without consent from authoritative bodies normally in charge of the decision as to what and who is considered worth to be remembered. The emplacement of these latter category of signs would normally not breach the law and include for example commemorative signs put up by homeowners on their property (see below).

In semiotic landscapes, three categories of commemorative semiotic practices can be identified: authorized, resemiotizing and self-authorized. Authorized practices involve the conceptualization, design and emplacement of, for example, monuments, memorials or commemorative street names as the result of a consensus agreed upon by communal bodies of power: a municipality of a town, city or village may decide who will be remembered on street signs, which event or person is seen as significant enough to be awarded a monument or a memorial (see, for example, Abousnnouga and Machin 2013; Blackwood and McAlister (2020); Dickinson, Blair and Ott (2010); Stevens and Sumartojo 2015). These decisions reflect dominant discourses of a certain point in time and period as to what and who is worth being commemorated in public space, and they are taken with or without input from the people and communities who inhabit or use the semiotic environments in which memorials or monuments are emplaced. They tend to serve ideological purposes, such as the legitimization of the nation state, as exemplified by Abousnnouga and Machin (2013) in their seminal work on the language of war memorials.

The second category of commemorative practices refers to spaces or artefacts not originally intended as memorials, which have been resemiotized, often by the people living in a specific semiotic landscape remembering events. Examples include historical battlefields, the infamous hanging trees, or Gallows trees (Gatrell 1994), or buildings like the prison on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was held for 25 years.

The third category, self-authorized commemorating practices in public space, refers to signs produced and emplaced by individual agents without official authorization. These include practices which breach the law, such as graffiti, but also legal individual initiatives of commemoration which have not been sanctioned by bodies of power and authority.

This study focuses on self-authorized commemorative signs produced and emplaced into a rural semiotic environment. As a research project it was prompted by ongoing participant observation of a specific area which happened to be rural. Within linguistics, the theoretical conceptualization of the dichotomy between 'rural' and 'urban' remains a work in progress. Since the 1960s, the discipline's emphasis has largely focused on urban centres: the early work of William Labov, for example, is often referred to as a contribution to 'urban dialectology' (Vandekerckhove 2010: 316). For sociolinguistics, the rural countryside, once a favored area of investigation for traditional dialectologists striving to document the most 'authentic' linguistic forms and establish isoglosses, had little appeal. This shift in focus can be attributed to prevailing discourses regarding 'urban' and 'rural' within which linguistic studies are embedded (Britain 2017). The theoretical framework employed for examining rural semiotic landscapes in this article draws on work in sociology, in particular Keith Halfacree's model of rural space (Halfacree 2006). His concept suggests that rural space is simultaneously a conceptual construct, a tangible entity, and a realm of practices. This approach melds material and discourse-based facets, coalescing in the activities of both groups and individuals, thus molding and configuring places and communities. Consequently, the region examined in this study qualifies as rural because its inhabitants, visitors, and policymakers collectively envision and label it as 'rural', each contributing their distinct notions to the overarching concept. It is also 'rural' because specific practices, such as food and energy production, or tourism, leave their mark on the villages and the surrounding landscape, which are interwoven with specific material circumstances, such as proximity to the sea or consistent access to wind for powering turbines.

The signs analysed for this study range from recent to centuries old, some are ephemeral, others comparatively permanent, and the sign producers represent various strata of rural society. It is a significant characteristic of rural semiotic landscapes that self-authorized signs can hardly remain anonymous like they probably

would be in an urban context (Reershemius 2021). The sign creators are often recognizable because they own or inhabit the space where they have emplaced their signs. In other cases, layers of narratives around specific signs make them traceable, at least to those who share a specific semiotized space and are familiar with the local narratives connected with them.

2 Data and methods of analysis

This study is a contribution to the growing body of research in the field of semiotic landscape research, interested in the "interplay between language, visual discourse, and the spatial practices and dimensions of culture, especially the textual mediation or discursive construction of place." (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 1). Like many studies in semiotic landscape research, it draws on Scollon and Scollon's (2003) concept of 'geosemiotics' as the relationship between space and social meaning, captured by the interplay of action (interaction order), the appearance of the sign (visual semiotics), and its location (place semiotics). Thus, signs in the semiotic landscape are examined here within the framework of interaction pragmatics, as outlined by Matras, Gaiser and Reershemius (2018: 54): signs are defined as localized communicative events that are embedded into a discourse context, "engaging a sender and addressee, drawing on a shared pool of experience and routines, and carrying a variety of illocutionary … functions – informational, expressive, directive, emblematic, persuasive, and others".

The present study is part of an ongoing investigation of language and multimodal communication in public places in 19 villages in northwest Germany which administratively belong to the rural municipality of Krummhörn (Figure 1).

The study combines quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis and is based on two complete photographic inventories of all signs in public space within the semiotic landscapes of the 19 villages of Krummhörn. The first inventory was conducted in 2010, followed by a second one in 2020.[2]

The Krummhörn Corpus 2010 consists of 1826 photographic tokens (including 553 street name signs); while the Krummhörn Corpus 2020 contains 3,378 (including 750 street name signs). Both corpora were input into a data base and tagged according to place, discourse type, language, context of agency, material design, information management, semiotic codification, and size.[3] During fieldwork, ad hoc communications with villagers and

Figure 1: Map of Krummhörn (Kamphues).

2 To conduct a meaningful quantitative analysis, an inventory of every single sign found in public space within an area under observation is a prerequisite. The only signs not included in Krummhörn Corpora 2010; 2020 were traffic signs and inscriptions on tombstones in the villages' cemeteries.

3 The tagging is based on the geosemiotic approach introduced by Scollon and Scollon (2003) and its adaptation by the large-scale research project "Signs of the Metropolis" which analyses the linguistic landscapes of the German Ruhr-metropolis (Mühlan-Meyer and Lützenkirchen 2017; Ziegler et al. 2018).

tourists inhabiting or visiting the spaces under investigation were recorded in fieldwork notes. In addition to the corpora and fieldwork notes, this study is based on over a decade of participant observation of the 19 villages with a focus on social and linguistic change (Reershemius 2011, 2020, 2021).

The signs, or communicative events, examined in this study are artefacts created by practices that include writing, using specific pictorial representations, or assembling symbolic materials. Thus, their examination will consider multimodal aspects, asking the question of which semiotic resources have been applied and combined to create meaning in a specific context (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). For each commemorative sign, it will consider its materiality, techniques of creation, and emplacement in the semiotic landscape.

3 Commemorative signage in context

An initial quantitative comparison of the two corpora taken as complete inventories of signage in public places in 2010 and in 2020 reveals a remarkable increase in overall signage by 106 percent, while the overall population of the municipality decreased by 8.8 % during the same period (Table 1).[4]

The quantitative results are, in many ways, surprising. Firstly, there is the sheer scale of the increase in signage in a period of only ten years, particularly in regulatory and private signs. Secondly, while commercial discourse is still dominant with the highest overall number of signs both in 2010 and in 2020, it has only increased slightly since 2010 compared with the other discursive domains. While the quantitative and qualitative comparison of the two corpora will need to take place elsewhere, the overall quantitative results have been presented here to provide context for the development of commemorative signs over a decade. Overall, commemorative signs are rare in both corpora: In 2010, they accounted for 0.6 % of the overall corpus; by 2020, they have more than doubled to 1.7 %. This increase shows that commemorative signs are far from being a stagnant entity as could be assumed when thinking of monuments or street names as the main components of commemorative discourse in public spaces.

During the first period of fieldwork for the 2010 inventory of signs in Krummhörn, I decided not to include the inscriptions on the tombstones in the 19 village cemeteries. Initial observations and walkabouts in the municipality's cemeteries had revealed the predominance of names, birth- and death dates on tombstones, which, at the time, did not seem relevant for a study of signs in public spaces. In hindsight, this decision was probably unwise. Cemeteries and tombstones are authorized spaces with highly formulaic representations of commemorating

Table 1: Quantitative overview of Krummhörn Corpus 2010; 2020.

Discourses	Krummhörn Corpus (2010)	Krummhörn Corpus (2020)	Increase since 2010
Commercial	820	884	64 (8 %)
Infrastructural	168	458	290 (173 %)
Regulatory	76	539	463 (609 %)
“Transgressive”	17	133	116 (682 %)
Private	178	546	368 (207 %)
Artistic	3	12	9 (300 %)
Commemorative	11	56	45 (409 %)
Total			106 %
Total	1,273 (+553 street name signs): 1826	2,628 (+750 street name signs): 3,378	1,552 (106 %)

4 In 2022, Krummhörn comprises a population of 11,854, 8.8 % fewer than in 2010 (Landesamt für Statistik Niedersachsen, LSN-Online Regionaldatenbank, Tabelle A100001G: Fortschreibung des Bevölkerungsstandes, Stand 31.Dezember 2021). A decreasing population is a problem faced by many rural communities which are not situated within commuting distance of larger urban environments (see, for example, Woods 2011: 162–199).

practices, where individuals have limited choices in terms of the language and modality in which to express themselves. Therefore, they would have been valuable additions to this study to contrast self-authorized practices with the officially endorsed ones. To compensate for this shortcoming, two representative villages were selected for in-depth analysis of their burial sites and the examination of the spaces and practices allocated to individuals for commemoration.

4 Authorized private commemoration

Apart from very few individuals commemorated in the public space of the municipality under investigation by plaques, statues, or monuments, the officially sanctioned commemorative practice to remember individuals consists of graves in the village graveyards and cemeteries. The two foci of this practice of commemoration are the deceased and the surviving bereaved (Sørensen 2009). Burying practices and spaces thus reflect the dead and those remembering them according to customs and practices established in specific cultures and regions.

The two villages observed here, as representative for the 19 villages of the municipality of Krummhörn are Campen and Loquard (see Map 1), and they both show three burial sites: the church building, the churchyard, and the cemetery.[5] Like most villages in Krummhörn, Loquard and Campen are centered around medieval church buildings dating back to the 13th century. In both churches, tombs of local dignitaries dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries can be found, for example, in Figure 2.

This tombstone commemorates a pastor who served the community of Loquard for 53 years. He passed away in 1,693 aged 78 years, 5 months, 20 days, according to the inscription.[6] The engraving is ornate, detailed, and provides information on the name and date of death of the deceased. It also reveals his age, his profession, his long career as a pastor, all of which is framed by religious phrases, his family crest, and a quote from the bible. This level of detail on a beautifully crafted tombstone must have been extraordinarily expensive, so it is not surprising that only very few individuals are commemorated in this form inside the churches as burial sites, an honor mainly reserved for pastors or rich landowners in Krummhörn.

For centuries, the traditional burial place had been the churchyard, a space in the immediate vicinity of the church. This practice became unsustainable, primarily due to population increases, but also because scientific discourses on public health during the 19th century identified burial places in densely populated neighborhoods as health hazards. This was based on the prevailing miasmatic theory of diseases which suggested that diseases were not transmitted through germs but through bad air emanating from noxious matter, such as decaying corpses. As a result, Loquard and Campen built new cemeteries during the first half of the 20th century, locating them at what used to be the outskirts of the villages.

The churchyards of the two villages observed exhibit marked social hierarchies, featuring family crypts for the local landowners and dignitaries, while the rest of the parishioners have more modest graves. However, even the latter reveal elements of the deceased's biography beyond the dates of birth and death (for example, see Figure 3).

This tombstone, set on a marble panel within an ornamented stone, not only reveals the name and dates of birth and death of the villager Gerd Folkerts but also commemorates him as a beloved husband and father of eight children.[7] The concise narrative sentence provides a voice for the grieving widow and includes a short biblical quote.

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5 I am indebted to Almuth Jürgensen for her support with fieldwork for this part of the investigation.

6 Text: ANNO 1693 DEN 17 FEBRUAR IST DER WOLL EHRWURDIGER UND WOLL GELAHRTER HERR LUCAS CONRADI TAMMAEUS GETREYER PASTOR ALHIE ZU LOQUARDT SANFT UND SEELIG IN DEM HERREN ENTSCHLAFFEN SEINES ALTERS 78 IAHREN 5 MONAT 20 TAGER, SEINES PREDIGAMTS IM 53 IAHRE UND ERWARTET IM CHRISTO IESU EINE VROLIGHE VEREINIGUNG DES LEIBS MIT DER SEELEN ZUM EWIGEN LEBEN.

On February 17th 1,693 the honorable and learned pastor Mr Lucas Conradi Tammaeus passed away here in Loquard quietly and peacefully aged 78 years, 5 months and 20 days, after 53 years as a preacher and awaits in Jesus Christ a happy reunion of body and soul in eternal life.

7 Hier ruhet mein innigstgeliebter Mann meiner acht Kinder guter Vater Gerd Folkerts *24.7.1895 + 30.4.1938-Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben. Offb.14,13.

Figure 2: 17th century tombstone in the church of Loquard (Photograph: Jürgensen).

In contrast, the new cemeteries do not exhibit any signs of social hierarchies: deceased villagers are remembered on tombstones of roughly the same size and quality of making. The inscriptions are limited to the names and dates of birth and death of the deceased.

Comparing the three burial sites of the villages reveals a reverse relationship between the marking of social hierarchies and individuality expressed by the tombstones and crypts: in earlier times, commemorative practices emphasized social hierarchy but allowed for a higher level of personal detail in remembering the deceased. The tombs inside the church or elaborate family crypts in the churchyard themselves served as displays of higher social status (Walter 1996). Current practices tend not to indicate social hierarchies, and remembering the deceased is now simplified to the presentation of the individual's name and dates of birth and death.

*Here rests in peace my beloved husband and father of my eight children Gerd Folkerts * 24.7.1895 + 30.4.1938. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Revelation 14:13.*

Figure 3: Tombstone Loquard Churchyard (Photograph: Jürgensen).

5 Self-authorized commemorative practices

The following qualitative analysis will look at examples of representative, self-authorized commemorative signs from the Krummhörn Corpus 2020, indicating whether they were observed as part of the Krummhörn Corpus 2010 or not. These signs were not only selected for their representativeness but also for the layers of local narratives associated with them which became evident as part of the observation process.

5.1 The street shrine

Figure 4 depicts an artefact located on a roadside leading out of the village of Rysum, which has become nearly imperceptible in its current state: a small wooden pole adorned with a candle and some sprigs of greenery. This artefact is positioned opposite a row of houses, but not in a location frequently used by pedestrians, making it easily overlooked. Those who notice it may conclude that it serves as a form of private memorial, given that its composition – candle and fir sprigs – is reminiscent of the arrangements typically seen on graves during the traditional memorial season in autumn. The practice of self-authorized roadside memorials has been increasingly

Figure 4: Street shrine (photograph: Kamphues). Krummhörn Corpus 2020 only.

observed in recent years. This includes the emerging tradition of marking locations where cyclists have come to harm in traffic accidents using so called 'ghost bikes' (Dobler 2011). These ghost bikes are second-hand bicycles painted white, sometimes accompanied by written comments about the victim and the circumstances of the accident.

The backstory of the small artefact by the roadside, however, is well-known to most of the villagers living within this specific semiotic environment. Several years ago, a road accident claimed the life of a child at this very location. In response, the child's friends and family erected a relatively substantial private memorial in the form of a wooden cross near the site of the accident. Adding to the challenge of comprehending the semiotic landscape, around 2019, tall green wooden crosses were placed in various locations throughout the municipality. These green crosses, however, were not memorials but rather expressions of protests by local farmers against what they perceived as oppressive regulations imposed by the government and the EU (https://www.agrarheute.com/politik/gruene-kreuze-setzen-richtige-zeichen-558578).[8] By 2021, the green crosses positioned along roads and cycling paths had disappeared, together with the cross dedicated to the young accident victim in Rysum. The artefact featured in Figure 4 has been erected in its place, most likely as an act of defiance against the municipality's attempts to clear the area of all forms of street shrines and protest symbols. Fraenkel (2011) describes street shrines as collections of material objects that structure space in a specific manner. In her essay on street shrines in New York in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, she characterizes them as ephemeral constructs that emerged immediately following the World Trade Center attack. In contrast to the 9/11 street shrines, the one in Rysum could be observed for years and in various material forms. It was maintained against the established wishes and regulations of the local municipality, which asserts its responsibility and authority over public space.

Roadside memorials commemorating deaths have become a global phenomenon that has proliferated over the past two decades (Mchunu 2020). Klaassens, Groote and Vanclay (2013) conducted an analysis of the

8 More recently, local fishermen have been erecting large wooden crosses adorned with a piece of netting to protest against restrictions on fishing.

composition and associated meanings of over 200 roadside memorials in the Netherlands. They concluded that by placing flowers and other artefacts symbolizing love and beauty, the grieving individuals seek to transform traumatic sites of death into places that offer solace.[9] Fraenkel (2011: 233) raises the question of when a collection of objects becomes a shrine. She posits that shrines are places where written material is displayed alongside candles, flowers, or other items such as toys, flags, ribbons, clothes, and so forth. According to Fraenkel, the resulting artefacts are delicate and transient, aligning with a cultural tradition of Vanitas (or memento mori) paintings – contemplative images prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

However, the example of the street shine in Rysum does not appear to convey a traditional memento mori message. Instead, it signifies a form of public grief in which the bereaved stake a claim to a particular space, defying the explicit regulations of authoritative bodies that typically control the semiotics of public spaces in matters of commemorating loss. They evidently seek more than the space allocated to them for mourning – the grave in the village cemetery – and insist on maintaining a presence in the space where the accident occurred for the public to notice, thus giving private grief a collective platform.

The example of the street shrine in the village of Rysum highlights the importance of acknowledging the individual and collective memories and narratives of those who inhabit and shape these spaces when reading and analyzing the semiotic landscape. The same principle applies, albeit in a different context, to the next example of commemorative practices represented by personalized graffiti.

5.2 Graffiti as self-authorized commemoration

Public transport in Krummhörn relies on buses connecting the villages with nearby towns, where many villagers work or attend school. In the 1960s, robust brick shelters were built so that people waiting for the bus were not exposed to the weather. These bus shelters soon became popular gathering spots for local teenagers, though they were also perceived as potentially menacing spaces due to their dark interiors, which were largely concealed from the outside. Consequently, in recent times, the brick shelters have been gradually replaced by modern structures made of transparent synthetic materials. The few remaining brick shelters, however, have evolved into canvasses for commemorative practices, taking the form of personal graffiti (see Figure 5). While the occasional spray-painted tag can also be spotted, the most prevalent form of graffiti comprises names, initials, dates, and some pictorial elements etched into the brick or written with water-resistant felt pens (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Graffiti (photograph: Kamphues). Krummhörn Corpus 2010; 2020.

9 For further aspects of roadside memorials see also Clark and Franzmann 2006, Hartig and Dunn 1998, Monger 1997, Smith 1999.

Graffiti, as defined here, involves secondary writing or the application of images on surfaces not originally intended to be written or drawn on (Lohmann 2018: 7). Examples of personal graffiti date back to ancient times. In her study on graffiti in ancient Pompeji, Lohmann (2018:76) contemplates the possible motivations behind scratching one's name, proclaiming love, or etching obscene images on walls and concludes that people did it simply because they could. The desire to leave a mark, according to Lohmann, appears to be a fundamental aspect of human history, with writing serving as a means of self-expression.[10] Keats (2008) posits that a primary objective of graffiti is to "confirm his or her own existence here on earth" (2008: 24). Daniell (2011) calls it the "human imprint", the urge to document one's presence at a specific place and time (2011: 465–466). Merrill and Hack (2012) emphasize that graffiti adds layers of narratives to spaces and buildings. This is evident in the case of the graffiti on the remaining brick bus shelters in Krummhörn. In a village, initials like the ones scratched into the brick wall in Photograph 4 are often recognizable. While waiting for the bus, villagers had the opportunity to contemplate the scratched initials and speculate about their creators. As it turns out, the graffiti *HJ 67 + WW1967* (Figure 5) carries a tale from over fifty years ago. It represents two teenage sweethearts who celebrated their love by scratching their initials into the wall of the bus shelter. During my documentation of the bus shelter graffiti, a woman in her forties approached me and shared an interesting anecdote. She mentioned that her mother used to jest about this particular scratching, recalling that the young couple split up shortly after 1967, and both later married other people from the same village. However, the husband of the young woman mentioned in the graffiti continued to tease her about it for many years. This story illustrates that the authorship of a graffiti is not only likely to be identified in a rural context but that it can also become part of local narratives, thus being collectively owned by the local community.

In the following example (Figure 6), the initials etched into a wall not only serve as a personal mark but also intentionally identify the owner of a property, in this case a manor house-like farm:

Figure 6 is not part of the two Krummhörn corpora as it is not situated in public space; rather, it can be found on a house front within a private garden. The initials are etched into a brick next to an entrance portal, which also bears the year of the building's completion, 1861. The current owners of the house can trace the initials back to an ancestor whose grave and tombstone can be found in the neighboring village. Notably, the scratching technique in this example is quite refined, resulting in almost calligraphic characters. Nevertheless, it serves as another instance of an individual leaving their mark by etching it in stone but within a different context.

In her study on graffiti in ancient Pompeji, Lohman (2018) found that names or initials constituted the largest group of graffiti. She views name graffiti as the quintessential form of self-presentation, with the sole purpose of leaving evidence of one's existence in a specific place. Graffiti creators, in this context, were essentially celebrating their own existence (Lohmann 2018: 78). Lohmann's analysis places graffiti within the domain of writing

Figure 6: Homeowner's initials (photograph: Kamphues).

10 Stern (2018) and Wallach (2020) also emphasize the role of graffiti in religious practices from antiquity until a shift in the meaning of writing since the late 19th century: for centuries it was part of a ritual for pious Jews to visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem, pray and write or scratch their names in Hebrew letters into the stone of the wall.

practices in the context of a Roman town, as well as within a culture of commemoration, alongside officially placed engravings, monuments, and statues. Therefore, scratched initials, like those on bus shelter or private house walls, contribute additional layers to the discourse of commemoration in the semiotic landscapes of the villages, with connected narratives persisting for fifty or even 150 years on.

5.3 The private home as canvas for commemorative practices

The example of Figure 6 discussed earlier illustrates how an individual etched their initials into a wall as a means of being remembered. However, since they were the owner of the house, this form of self-authorized commemoration goes beyond merely celebrating their existence; it also serves to identify the individual as the proud owner of a large property, and as such what is potentially perceived as a successful member of the local community.

Up to this point, this research has explored self-authorized commemorative practices where individuals personally assembled, wrote, or scratched the artefacts they emplaced in the semiotic landscapes. The following examples involve practices that rely on the craftmanship of others. One such practice, which has left its mark on one of the farmhouse buildings in the region, is depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 7 shows an elaborate and ornate plaque that the owner had integrated into the center of the front wall of their house. This plaque does not display initials; instead, it features the owner's full name, the year the house was built, and what appears to be the initials of some of their ancestors. It also incorporates elements from the owner's family crest. This plaque is a self-authorized commemoration of wealth, tradition, and achievement, all centered around a name.

Historically, the area under observation was socially divided into a small group of landowners and villagers who worked as farm laborers or craftspersons. This social hierarchy, which persisted until the 1950s in the villages of Krummhörn, is still evident in the architecture with grand, manor-like farm buildings, such as the one featured in Photograph 6, alongside smaller houses for the farm laborers. While the social structure of Krummhörn has undergone significant changes due to the arrival of industry, such as a Volkswagen factory in the area, the memories of the past remain vivid. Many of the smaller houses in the Krummhörn villages prominently display the emblem of a working man with a plow and horses (Figure 8). This sign is quite popular and can be observed in all 19 villages. It is available for purchase in local hard-ware stores or garden centers, either cast in metal or carved in wood.

Figure 7: Landowner's house (photograph: Kamphues). Krummhörn Corpus 2010; 2020.

Figure 8: The working man's emblem (photograph: Kamphues). Krummhörn Corpus 2010; 2020.

Although today hardly anyone still works on the few remaining farms in the municipality, villagers display the sign as a symbol of a shared past and social class.[11]

6 Conclusions and discussion

This study introduces the concept of self-authorized commemorative practices to the analysis of semiotic landscapes. It investigates how self-authorized signs are established, by whom, and the discourses in which they are inscribed. The analysis of self-authorized commemorative practices in the villages of Krummhörn has revealed that the semiotic landscape of the municipality is interwoven with signs and artefacts by which individuals have left their marks, in addition to the authorized commemorative practices normally displayed in the form of monuments, statues, plaques or dedicated burial sites.

The self-authorized commemorative signs analyzed here vary in terms of their materiality, age, emplacement, social agency, and motivation. Some of the signs were only a few years old, while others had endured for decades; and some were emplaced centuries ago. The sign creators drew and continue to draw on established semiotic practices of their respective time and age. However, as illustrated by the example of scratched graffiti, certain practices appear to be timeless. At least one of the signs, the street shrine, has been diligently maintained for years by its creators. While many signs are ad hoc creations executed by the sign creators themselves, others rely on craftmanship or even mass production, such as in the symbol of the working man with a plow and horses. Many of the self-authorized commemorative signs observed here were displayed on the sign creators' property, such as the home-owner's initials scratched into the wall of their house or signs featuring the workman with a plow and horses on the homes of individuals who showcase their social heritage. It is a distinguishing characteristic of rural semiotic landscapes that private spaces, such as houses or gardens, are often used as a canvas to convey semiotic messages, thereby transforming it from a private into a public place. Other practices involve claiming spaces for intended commemorative acts, as demonstrated by the street shrine or the bus shelter graffiti.

The motivations for self-authorized commemorative practices also vary considerably. Individuals contribute to the commemorative signs in the semiotic rural landscape to celebrate their existence, their achievements, their belonging to a social class, the simple fact that they were present at a certain point in time, or to remember loved ones.

The self-authorized commemorative signs analyzed here have a number of features in common: The sign creators appear to have sought to leave their mark in the semiotic landscape they inhabited, transcending the confines of officially sanctioned commemorative practices. For those responsible for the street shrine, the conventional, officially approved forms of public mourning – such as a grave with a tombstone in the

11 Some of the retirees who moved into the area more recently have also adopted the sign of the working man with plough and horse, although informal communication with one of them revealed that they may not all be familiar with its meaning: the person I talked to said that they had emplaced it on their house because they found it pretty and it seemed to belong to the region.

cemetery – might not have been enough to express their grief. Similarly, the owners of grand houses chose not to delegate the determination of their personal significance to bodies of authority; instead, they placed their own memorials right above the main entrance of their manors.

The commemorative signs analyzed here also have in common that they are interwoven into the narrative fabric of the rural environment. Often overlooked, especially by tourists only visiting the area, many of these self-authorized commemorative signs are owned by the communities residing in these villages. People jest about a specific aspect of bus shelter graffiti for decades or engage in debates regarding the street shrine, questioning its appropriateness as an expression of grief. In pragmatic terms, the sign readers debate the sign's illocution as part of its perlocution. In doing so, they transform these sites into meaningful places of successful commemoration The key to a commemorative sign working in the semiotic landscape thus depends on the communicative processes between those who create and emplace signs and those who read and understand them in a given social context. It is by involving others into their sense of self that sign creators succeed in claiming public space for self-authorized commemoration. The quantitative research conducted for this study has revealed a remarkable increase in the number of commemorative signs within the observed area over a span of ten years. Further research is needed to investigate whether this trend persists and if similar patterns emerge elsewhere. Many of the recent signs have been emplaced by individuals, suggesting a dissatisfaction with established forms of commemoration. Further research should explore whether self-authorized commemorative practices in the semiotic landscapes contribute to a discourse of increased individualization and a growing emphasis on the importance of the self.

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