Grave gowns from children burials from the 16ᵗʰ–18ᵗʰ centuries

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The paper discusses children's burial attire at the examples of burials dated to the 16ᵗʰ/18ᵗʰ century. Besides the particular finds, written and iconographical sources concerning these periods are taken into account. The finds of swaddling-clothes in graves indicate a significant mortality rate among neonates and infants. Children's grave robes were imitations of adults' clothes and they are the most numerous finds. Some of them reminded everyday clothes. In the case of boys, this was usually the Polish national costume consisting of a żupan and a *kontusz* over it. Girls' dresses were imitations of Western fashion trends, smaller versions of the clothes worn by noble ladies and burgher women. It is impossible, basing on the types of garments, to distinguish what faith the children belonged to. However, all the garments are excellent examples of the mutual transfers between the Polish and Western fashion trends and their influences on the ways of dressing children.

KEY-WORDS: silk, grave gown, funeral ceremony, swaddling-clothes, żupan, *kontusz*

For centuries, garments and ornaments were used to emphasize wealth and status of various social groups. Clothes made of silk were one of the most important attributes of people belonging to the social elité, which was connected with the high quality and beauty of these textiles as well as the limited access to them. Clothes made entirely of silk were extremely expensive, therefore to save money various tailor's tricks were used. Some of the used fabrics was semi-silk and sometimes those parts of the garment which were not visible were made of cheaper material, such as wool or linen. Non-silk dresses were frequently decorated with silk ornaments, e.g., a woollen or linen dress was ornamented with silk bands and ribbons. In the case of grave gowns, these silk-saving treatments were noted quite frequently. In some cases only parts of the garments worn during lifetime were used, e.g., the front part of a silk garment was folded and pinned onto the grave gown, whereas the back part was retained and reused by the living. When a grave gown was supposed to be entirely new, similar tricks were

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implemented, e.g., only the front of the dress with the sleeves basted to it and decorated with bowknots and decorative bands was used.

Children's clothes were inspired by the adult fashions, which is clearly visible on family portraits where the father, the head of a family, and his sons are presented in identical best clothes[1]. Similar situation is noted for mothers and daughters[2]. A typical children's attire consisted of the same elements: dresses, shirts, and bonnets which were worn mainly by little children. In the 18th century many boys over two years old did not have bonnets (Drążkowska 2007: 68).

Iconographical representations of infants reveal an exceptional form of such 'garments', namely, swaddling clothes, in which newborns and infants were wrapped[3]. There were two ways of using them: firstly, several metre long bands covered a child tightly from the neck to the feet, leaving only the face uncovered. The other way was to use much shorter bands and a child was first wrapped in soft fabric (linen most probably) which was fastened with separate strips of silk . Such silk bands used as swaddling-clothes have been excavated in the grave crypt in the Holy Virgin Mary church in Kostrzyń on the Oder. The swaddling was made of 3.8 m long and 3.8 cm wide silk rep ribbon. The child's head may have been covered with a linen bonnet, decorated with a 0.5 cm wide folded silk band (Drążkowska 2007: 30 – fig. 6, 208). The child was tightly wrapped in a long, silk ribbon, the end of which, together with a bow was pinned on the front (Drążkowska 2005: 56; 2007: 32–34). This practice of keeping infants in swaddling before they started walking is known from various European cultures. Children swaddled in this way can be seen in the paintings 'Decaying tree' (Hieronim Bosch, 1495–1515) or 'Miracles of St. Charles Borromeo' (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, 1613–1614).

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[1] *Zbigniew Ossoliński z trzema synami, kasztelan czerski*, (Zbigniew Ossolinski, the castellan of Czersk with his three sons) before 1654(?); unknown painter: Muzeum Zbrojownia na Zamku w Liwa (Grupa 2005: fig. 20); *Maria Teresa i Franciszek I Stefan z jedenaściorgiem dzieci*, (Maria Teresa and Franciszek I Stefan with their eleven children) about 1754, Martin von Meytens; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Grupa 2005: fig. 31).

[2] *Modlitwa przy stole* (mieszczańskim) (The table prayer), 1740, Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin: Luvre, Paris (Grupa 2005: fig. 24); *Graf Plettenberg z rodziną*, (Family portrait of Graf Plettenberg) (1727, Robert Tourniéres; The Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (Grupa 2005: fig. 32).

[3] An infant tightly wrapped in swaddling strips – A. Bosse, *The Visit to the Wet Nurse*; A child in swaddling – A. della Robbia, The Infant, 1465, Florence, Ospedale degli Innocenti; An infant tightly wrapped in swaddling – A. Mantegna, a fragment of the painting *Presentation at the Temple*, 1455, Berlin, Staaliche Mussen Gemäldegalerie; A child wrapped in swaddling and red blanket – J. de Ribera, fragment of the painting *The Bearded Woman*, 1631, Toledo, Palacio Lerma; An infant in swaddling – G. de La Tour, fragment of the painting *The Newborn,* 1648, Rennes, The Museum of Fine Arts; An infant partly wrapped in swaddling and dressed in a short vest – M. Gøje, grave sculpture *The Infant*, 1590, Gunderslev Church (Drążkowska 2007: fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7).

When the children grew a little, they were wrapped only partially. They had free hands and they were dressed in garments similar to nightgowns. This was connected with the belief that 'good death' should take place at home in the company of the family, therefore the deceased were supposed to look during the funeral ceremony as if they were sleeping (Grupa 2005: 28, 53).

The most popular grave gown was a plain patterned garment, decorated with various elements: bowknots, clasps, gold and silver bands, artificial and natural flowers, and decorative buttons (Majorek and Grupa 2014: 334). The simplicity of this dress made it difficult to define univocally, basing on the clothes only, what the sex of the deceased was. In such instances, information placed on coffin tops is very helpful.

Plain silk dresses excavated in the nave of The Holy Virgin Mary church in Toruń belonged to the sisters Anna and Zuzanna Majerman, identified on the basis of the silver-plated coffin boards. Anna, who died in 1619, was dressed in a plain weave 1/1 silk gown. The dress bosom was creased a little and the only decoration was a rectangular collar made of the same fabric, with a plant ornament made in raised embroidery technique, using silk thread with metal wrap. Zuzanna, who died in 1623, had a dress made of silk textile with a floral-geometrical ornament (Fig. 1). Both dresses consisted only of frontal parts and basted sleeves (Grupa 2005: 54).

A long silk grave gown was excavated in the eastern crypt (section A) in Szczuczyn. The coffin had an inscription: STANI KONOPKA, which indicates a boy's burial. The loose grave gown was creased around the neck, with long, wide sleeves finished with 1 cm wide cuffs. The garment was longer than the skeleton. The pillowcase was made of linen and decorated, like the gown, with silk bowknots (Grupa *et al.* 2013: 105). The other children buried in this crypt part remained nameless for the researchers as the coffins bore no inscriptions.

In the case of the finds from the graves in Kostrzyń on the Oder, Lublin, and Ringebui Veøy in Norway, it is also difficult to identify the dead children's sex, because no additional information was preserved on the coffins (Vedeler 2010: 253; Grupa *et al.* 2013: 104).

There are, however, examples of garments prepared specially for the grave, and these are the three dresses uncovered during the archaeological excavations conducted in the former Evangelical church in Bytom Odrzański. The relics of silk textiles were found in the crypt of the Schönaich family, who were the church founders. The three described dresses belong to the girls who died at a very early age. The first two were worn by one-year-old children and the third one belonged to a girl who died when she was seven. The two infant dresses were very simple long tubular gowns made of poor quality silk, probably blue, in plain weave 1/1[4]. They were decorated with pressed

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[4] At present, when the plant pigment is decomposed, the textile is green-brown in colour (the author's observation).
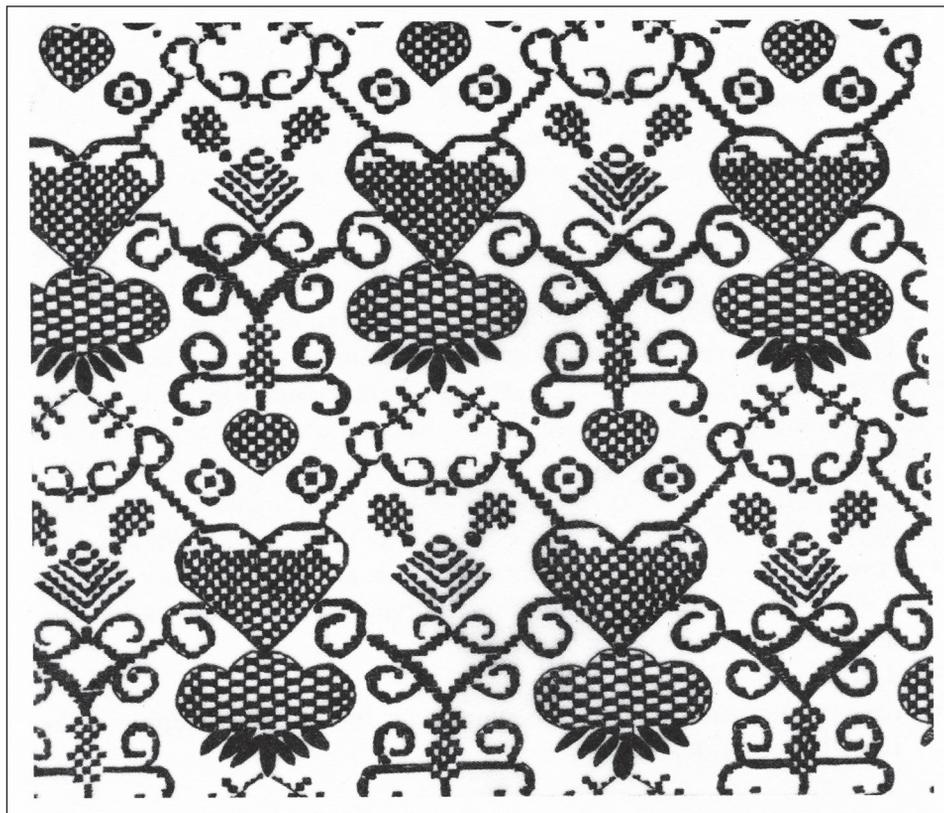
Fig. 1. Ornament pattern from Zuzanna Majerman's dress, Toruń. Drawing by
W. Matuszewska-Kola

folds on either side of the frontal part. The space between the folds was ornamented
with decorative bowknots, pinned to the textile. The dresses had no back parts and
the fronts were long enough to be folded under the children's feet (Fig. 2). The same
textile served as the material for the pillowcases and their corners were decorated with
ribbons shaped into flowers. The pillows were stuffed with hops[5] (Grupa 2011). Longer
grave dresses, bigger than the dead children, are known both from the archaeological
and iconographical sources. Frederic and Mary, the children of the Danish king,

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[5] The custom of stuffing pillows and mattresses is known from many archaeological sites. In the
burials of Frederic Christian and Mary Catherine in the Roskilde cathedral, rosemary and lavender were
identified. These herbs filled the pillows, mattresses and covers placed inside the coffins (Østergård 1988:
220–221).

Fig. 2. Infant dress before and after conservation, Bytom Odrzański. Photo by
D. Grupa

Christiansen IV, buried in the cathedral in Roskilde, were dressed in such very long silk gowns (Johannsen 1988: 46–48).

The older girl's dress was fashioned after female dresses worn in the 18th century. The dress bosom was decorated with bows and creased bands and was made of semi-silk textile basted to the flared skirt, which was decorated with plenty of creased bands making the impression of looseness and enhancing the appearance of the garment.

Examples of small boys' grave clothes are provided by the *kontusz* and żupan type garments uncovered in Lublin, Tworkowo and Szczuczyn. They were garments imitating Polish national costume where the żupan was worn underneath the *kontusz*. The tight-fitting upper part of the żupan matched the male figure while the flared bottom part made body movements easy. The *kontusz*, worn at the top, was not tight-fitting and serving as a kind of overcoat, had cut-open sleeves which could be thrown back.

Lublin excavations yielded two sets consisting of a *kontusz* and a *żupan*. One set was made of silk satin, the other, of patterned damask. To save the silk textile, both *kontusz* garments were deprived of the sleeves. The silk żupan, at present brown in colour, was 70 cm long with 38 cm long sleeves. It consisted of a one-piece back and a two-piece cut front with fifteen textile buttons with loops made of plaited string. The upper part was tight-fitting and the bottom one was flared and had overlapping flaps, cuts at the sides, and pocket-like openings. All the rims and openings were lined with plaited string of silk thread with metal (gold) wrap. Only the upper part of the silk *kontusz*, light brown in colour at the time of discovery, was preserved. The *kontusz* was 80 cm long and 40 cm wide at the waist. It had a one-piece back and a two-piece front with twelve textile buttons and loops of plaited string under which some woollen fibres, probably coming from the lining, were identified. The *kontusz* flaps overlapped each other and had cuts at the sides (Drążkowska and Grupa 2002; Drążkowska 2007: 217–218).

The other set was made of patterned damask. The *żupan* was 60 cm long with 40 cm long sleeves and a 27 cm wide waist. The back was one piece and the front was two piece with twelve textile buttons and string loops. The upper part was tight-fitting, the bottom, flared with overlapping flaps, cuts on both sides and pocket openings. The *żupan* was excavated together with a 74 cm long *kontusz*, which was 38 cm wide at the waist and made of identical patterned textile. It had a one-piece back and a two-piece front fastened with ten textile buttons and plaited string loops. Also in this case woollen fibres were identified under the string (probably the lining) (Drążkowska 2007: 219–220; Drążkowska and Grupa 2012: 315–324). In both sets the *żupan* garments were shorter than the *kontusz* garments, probably reaching below the knee or to the mid-calf.

Tworkowo delivered one child żupan excavated without a *kontusz* but with a silk sash. The *żupan* was made of silk damask with floral motifs (at present all brown-yellow in colour). It was 50 cm long and had 22 cm long sleeves, a one-piece back, a cut and two-piece front, and was fastened with hooks sewn askew. The upper part was tight-fitting, the bottom one, flared with overlapping flaps, gores on both sides, and pocket-like openings. The sash was made of silk fabric with a geometrical pattern and was 100 cm long and 8.2 cm wide. It was yellow-brown at the moment of discovery (Drążkowska 2007: 215).

The western crypt (section A) in Szczuczyn revealed a burial presumably of August Michał Szczuka, who died in 1702 (Grupa *et al.* 2013: 105). He was deposited in the grave in a yellow-green at the moment of discovery żupan, made of silk textile, decorated with vertical pink stripes. The żupan was 72 cm long, with sleeve length of 47 cm, and waist width of 32 cm. It had a one-piece back and a cut two-piece front, fastened with fifteen textile buttons in groups of three with loops of plaited string. Its upper

part was tight and its flared skirt had overlapping flaps. The bottom was gored with cuts at sides. There were no pocket openings.

It is worth noting the standards maintained by the people living in the period between the 16ᵗʰ and 18ᵗʰ centuries. It was very important for them to mark their position and wealth. Those were the days when social group distinctions were related to lifestyles organised according to specific rules and privileges, which determined the affiliation to a respective social class from birth to death. Luxurious objects served as decorations, but also as symbols with well-defined meanings. This is clearly indicated by the big quantities of silk small works of art used for decorating grave gowns, coffin upholstery, or the catafalques.

Silk threads were frequently combined with metal wrap silver or golden in colour, creating geometrical and plant patterns. Such compositions enriched bands and textiles with splendour desired by the nobles and town patricians. The inhabitants of the Vistula towns, such as Toruń, Kwidzyn, Gniew, and Gdańsk, established their own rules concerning various aspects of everyday life and family-church ceremonies of funerals or weddings (Mocarski 1924; Kizik 1998; 2001a; 2001b; Grupa 2005). Although all these towns had their own specific laws, they did not fall behind the Western and other Central European towns of the period as regards splendour and luxury. According to the 17ᵗʰ century written sources, the sumptuary law did not embrace the nobles and patricians, who, as a result, engaged in a kind of rivalry. It led to the situations when such ceremonies as, e.g., *pompa funebris*, arranged by the burghers were big events engaging all the inhabitants of the town. The expenditures made to purchase all kinds of decorations were so exorbitant that the deceased's family frequently went into debt and also had to pay high fines for not respecting the sumptuary laws. This was true for all the prominent religious groups in Poland. In theory the Protestants opted for moderation but they were equally extravagant as their Catholic neighbours when decorating churches, biers, and the deceased themselves, with rich silk ribbons, bands, and bowknots (Fig. 4). This can be confirmed by the burials of the Majerman sisters from Toruń or the siblings from Bytom Odrzański.

Apart from answering the questions about the differences in the burial liturgies themselves, the archaeological sites yield elements of grave equipment being the only recordable remains of those ceremonies. Archaeological collections originating from the graves of both religious groups comprise plain and long grave robes and mortal shirts. The grave dresses from Bytom Odrzański belonging to the Protestants include two characteristic plain robes. However, the third one, mentioned above, requires particular attention. It is a typical example of an item imitating Western fashion, but also the only child gown with a really female character, with features of robes worn by ladies living in nobles' and burghers' families in the 18ᵗʰ century (Fig. 3). The confirmed boys' burials yielded żupan and *kontusz* like garments which represent the Polish
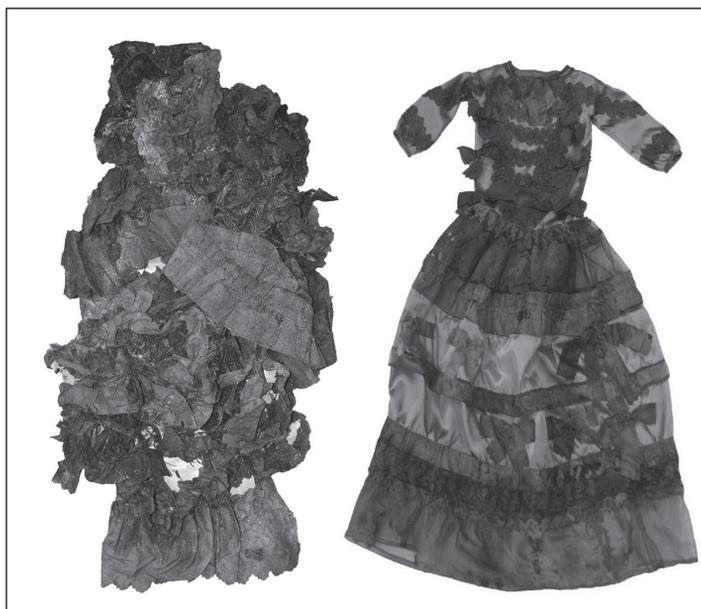
Fig. 3. Older girl's dress before and after conservation, Bytom Odrzański.
Photo by D. Grupa
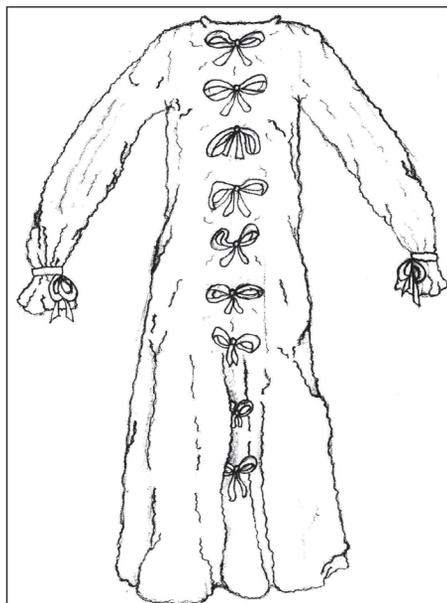
Fig. 4. Reconstruction of grave gown on the base of silk bowknots location in the burial. Drawing by J. Grupa

national costume, worn in the 17th/18th century in the Catholic and Protestant courts alike. Thanks to this information we are aware that the representatives of both religious groups cared very much for having an appropriate, according to their ideas, burial ceremonies and were rather unwilling to obey the official burial laws.

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