

Child life perceived through material objects: modern-time children's coffins from archaeological excavations

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Coffins are one of the material aspects of burial ceremonies of the modern period. Recent years have brought an increased interest of archaeologists in exploring churches and cemeteries. An attempt at defining the features typical of children's coffins of that period on the basis of the artefacts excavated from three selected sites was made, describing their form, material and decorations. The analyses were conducted in order to understand the similarities and differences in burial ceremonies of children and adults. The source material (coffins) depicts the relations between respective age groups of the studied communities, including the family financial status, preferences and emotions after a child loss. The results of the excavations juxtaposed with the anthropological and historical research have made it possible to outline a more overall picture of the child and its role in the past societies.

KEY-WORDS: coffin, child, Szczuczyn, Gniew, Płonkowo

INTRODUCTION

After many years of neglect, the source material base for studying child life has slowly begun to grow, creating from year to year a more and more overall picture of childhood of the past centuries. However, the available archaeological sources are still scarce and the ones which exist deliver little information concerning the youngest society members.

The written sources provide rich information about modern times and the results of the archaeological and anthropological research may provide the grounds on which it will be possible to reproduce, i.a., the children's living conditions and their position in the social hierarchy throughout the years. The written sources include: legal reports, court documents, various lists and inventories (Klonder 2000: 85–91), expense registers, birth and funeral books (Kwaśny 2001: 28), visitation acts. Last wills, letters and

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memorials are also significant sources of knowledge (Żołędź-Strzelczyk 2011: 10). Another type of source material includes all the categories of artefacts and bone material obtained during archaeological excavations, the preservation of which is, unfortunately, determined by the soil and water conditions at the site. The anthropologists studying children bone material often emphasize the difficulties resulting from the poor state of preservation the bones due to their delicate features and small dimensions.

The high rate of mortality of children less than seven years old was caused by childhood illnesses, lack of hygiene, low medical skills, and specific living conditions (Kondracka 2003: 15). The results of the anthropological studies generally include information about, i.a., the skeleton completeness, estimation of death age, and the metrical features related to the body sizes. The specialist section includes: the features indicating deficiency of vitamins C and D (responsible for scurvy and rickets), lesions, skull and post-cranial skeleton traumas, characteristics of inflammatory diseases (e.g. tuberculosis), and other pathological changes (e.g. growth anomalies) (Kozłowski *et al.* 2009: 69). Having compiled these data we obtain a complex estimation of individual and population's state of health basing on bone remnants. The archaeological excavations which yield artefacts connected with children's lives such as toys, everyday usage objects and grave accessories complete the information.

CHILD'S DEATH

The Antiquity and the Middle Ages did not recognize childhood. It was as late as the modern period when a child was noticed and the necessity of caring for its development and shaping its personality found its place in general thinking. Between the 16th and 18th century child mortality rate was still very high. Every family experienced a child's death and parents' reactions: grief and longing, were expressed in various ways. The written sources provide direct information on the subject (Kizik 1998; 2001: 49, 62–63; Kwak 2001: 21; Kwaśny 2001: 29; Grupa *et al.* 2014: 11–26), while archaeological excavations inform us about it in an indirect way (Drażkowska 2005: 19–40; 2006: 209–217; 2007; Majorek and Grupa 2013: 69–81; 2016: 163–172; Grupa *et al.* 2014). The traits of a dead child are determined by analysing the location of the burial and grave goods (coffin, coffin portrait, garments, haberdashery accessories, footwear, wreaths, pictures, etc.).

In recent years intensive excavations in churches and cemeteries have been conducted, in the course of which many different burials of individuals at various ages at death have been uncovered. They have shown that the wealthier society representatives were buried in church crypts or naves and the poorer, in cemeteries and churchyards, regardless of their age (Grupa 2005; Grupa and Kozłowski eds. 2009; Golonka ed. 2013; Grupa and Dudziński eds. 2013; Grupa *et al.* 2014; Dudziński *et al.* 2015; Grupa *et al.* 2015a; Grupa *et al.* 2015b; Drażkowska ed. 2015).

The tradition of burying the deceased in coffins became popular in Poland in the Early Mediaeval period, although it still should be remembered that various coffin forms were also used in the prehistoric times. On the other hand, ethnographical sources inform us about burials without any coffins in modern and present times. Therefore, it is interesting to study the reasons of equipping small dead children with coffins (the remains of which are excavated by archaeologists), what criteria were used in choosing their forms and what the typical ornaments were.

CHILDREN COFFINS FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

This paper presents the analyses of selected children's burials in coffins from the following sites: Szczuczyn (Podlaskie voivodeship), Gniew (Pomorskie voivodeship), Płonkowo (Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship) (the research was supervised by assistant professor Małgorzata Grupa from The Institute of Archaeology, NCU Toruń). The preliminary results indicate some regularities and differences in children's coffins from the 16th–18th century but they should be treated only as the premises for further studies. No statistics are presented because only a section of the archaeological work is discussed. The analyses concern determining the raw materials used for making the coffins, the constructions, dimensions, methods of decoration (carving, painting, upholstering) of the coffins, and the additional elements, e.g., legs, handles, etc. The degree of detail of the descriptions depends, of course, on the state of preservation of the features.

The coffins were composed two basic elements: the bottom part (chest) and the cover (lid). The bottom parts of modern coffins usually consist of two long wooden side walls and two short head and leg parts, placed on a bottom, trapezoid in cross-section, while the lids are frequently more complex in their construction: long walls (often composed of many elements), two short walls and the lid tops, as a result the tops are polygonal in cross section (Majorek and Grupa 2013: 73–74).

The crypts located under the presbytery of the Holy Virgin Mary's church in Szczuczyn, excavated between 2012 and 2013, yielded over 100 burials including 98 coffins (32 belonging to children, who died between 1705 and 1830) (Fig. 1). The coffins were well preserved, which allowed to determine their dimensions. They were made from wood, and traces of paint and upholstery were preserved. The chests were made of from 5 thick planks (2 being short walls, 2 long side walls, and one bottom plank), had raised lids made of 5 or 7 planks (2 shorter walls, 3–5 longer ones), but 5-piece covers were predominant. The planks were 2.5–4.5 cm thick. The coffins were polygonal in cross-section, elongated – trapezoid in shape. No nails were used: all the coffins were fixed with wooden pegs. The lids and bottoms were fastened together with 2 wooden pegs in the shorter walls at the head and 1 or 2 pegs in the shorter walls at the feet.

The decorative elements included rare occurrences of supports in the in form of circular thrown legs (from 4 to 6 items), differing in size depending on their location



Fig. 1. Szczuczyn, western crypt. Children burials in coffins. Photo by M. Majorek

in the coffin bottom; the higher and most protruding legs were situated in the broadest and highest coffin part. In rare cases wooden borders fixed to the upper rim of bottom part and on the joints of the long planks and the lid were recorded. No handles were discovered.

The coffins had mainly painted decorations, only two of them were upholstered with silk textile and decorative bands with metal wrap fastened with brass rivets (Fig. 2). The main colours used to paint the coffins with were white, blue, and red (Fig. 3); rarely black, brown, yellow, or orange, but these were mostly used for the details. It should be remembered, however, that paint pigment underwent decomposition, hence the coffins which are at present orange, bright brown or yellow could have originally been red. The coffins were monochromatic while various applied decorative elements, mainly plant motifs, e.g., branches, were executed in the colours contrasting with the background, e.g., red on a blue background; there were also rivet imitations painted at the edges and joints. In most cases the shorter walls had *Marian symbols* (at feet sides) and *IHS* (short walls at heads) and the tops had painted crosses in colours different from the surface. In some cases there were remains of initial letters of the names and surnames painted as well as the date of the death.

The excavations conducted in Gniez between 2009 and 2013 also yielded significant information about the local community, including the material expressions of children's burial ceremonies. The research embraced both the church interior and the yard which



Fig. 2. Szczuczyn, western crypt. Child coffin upholstery with silk textile and decorative bands with metal wrap fastened with brass rivets. Photo by M. Majorek



Fig. 3. Szczuczyn, eastern crypt. Child burial in a painted coffin with polygonal cross-section. Photo by M. Przymorska-Sztuczka

had been intensely exploited as a burial ground. Unfortunately, not many coffins were uncovered there, probably due to the unfavourable soil conditions in the examined area. The coffins discovered inside the church were better preserved.

The children's coffins from Gniew are dated between the 16th and 18th century. They were rather poorly preserved and were often recognized only as strips of decomposed wood, therefore it was only possible to estimate their maximum lengths and widths. They are polygonal in cross-section, elongated – trapezoid in shape. They were made from wood but it was impossible to determine the number of planks used for constructing them and the types of fastening. In rare cases it was possible to identify the remains of planks indicating a 3-piece raised lid collapsed under the weight of the soil (Fig. 4). Sometimes iron nails were found, which may confirm their functions in making the bottoms and tops, however, it was impossible to establish how they were combined.

The discovered decorative elements included, e.g., rivets placed on the coffin tops and short walls, which could indicate that they had originally been upholstered or that dates of death or initial name letters had been 'written' by them. The rivets may also suggest that wreaths, presumably made of thin wire, wound around with silk thread and filled with textile, creating flower petals and leaves, had been placed on the coffin



Fig. 4. Gniew, trench 5/2013 under the church floor. Child burial in a wooden coffin with polygonal cross-section, equipped with relics of leather upholstery. Photo by D. Grupa

tops. There were also traces of cordovan imitation being the remains of external upholstery made of leather with floral motifs painted in gold, red and black.

The excavations in Płonkowo, carried out in 2006–2007 also provided valuable information concerning the local community. The discovered coffins are dated to the 16th–18th century. The children were buried under the church floor and in the graveyard and in many instances, traces of coffins were reported. Like in Gniew the artefacts were in bad condition allowing only to make the basic measurements of length and width and identify the material as wood fastened together with nails. The children's coffins were deprived of any decorations, although their existence cannot be excluded. The coffins from Płonkowo were trapezoid or polygonal in cross-sections, rectangular in longitudinal cross-sections (Fig. 5) and trapezoid in shape.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Middle Ages were deprived of awareness that childhood is a separate life stage. Even art itself ignored the youngest. The few children reported in iconography are



Fig. 5. Płonkowo, trench 2/2007. Child burial in a wooden coffin with trapezoid cross-section. Photo by M. Majorek

presented in clothes not differing from the adults' outfits. They were smaller and that was the only difference (Grupa 2005: 88). The situation lasted for centuries. It was the period of Enlightenment which recognized childhood, and this can be noticed in the burial rites, written and material sources. Some parents may have had indifferent attitudes to their offspring's death, but it must have been a real tragedy for the others, which is expressed in literature, memories, letters, and grave inscriptions (Żołądź-Strzelczyk 2002: 242, Jarczykowa 2012: 126–128), laments (Banasiowa 2009: 129).

Modern times note also some differences between the grave equipment of a child and an adult person. Although the coffin material, shape and form remain the same regardless the age at the time of death, the decorations are different. The planks used for children's coffins seem to be very thick and solid, which results from the fact that coffin chests were made of the same material for all age groups. The archaeological sources described in this paper give evidence that children's coffins were painted in different colours than the adults' ones. Adult individuals were deposited in coffins in dark colours: brown, black, occasionally red (Majorek and Grupa 2013: 80), but very rarely can we meet ornaments of delicate branches and flowers on them.

Adult coffins are more often upholstered and the external textile is usually identified as silk and wool. Until now, external woollen upholstery has not been reported for children's coffins and silk appears very rarely (only two cases have been reported). Szczuczyn examples may indicate that the upholstery of children's coffins, if any, was made of silk (Grupa *et al* 2013: 104) in bright colours (despite pigment decomposition, they still preserve their bright beige colour), contrary to red, burgundy or brown heavy woollen textiles, patterned silk damasks and fluffy velvets used for the adults' coffins. The other decorative elements such as handles, legs, or surrounding borders appear more rarely on children's coffins.

It was a surprising discovery to excavate relics of painted leather on a children's coffin in Gniew, especially as the other coffin relics did not possess any decorations of this kind. The burial of that particular child differed in many ways. The coffin top and the interior resting directly on the skeleton bore readable signs of wreaths made of thin wire and textiles. Modern times emphasized visually in particular the bodies and coffins of children, virgins and young boys (Kizik 2001: 197), which can be confirmed by the preliminary results of the archaeological studies presented above. It should be remembered, however, that the material culture aspects discussed here concerned children originating mainly from wealthy families, which is also confirmed by the location of the burials (crypts, presbytery, church aisles, as well as the closest church vicinity).

There remains the problem of how strong the influence of sumptuary law was and how strictly it was obeyed with respect the appearance of the children's coffins. The popularity of richly decorated high coffins with polygonal cross-sections found their reflection in the regulations from the 17th and 18th century (Kizik 2001: 202). Did the administrative pressures (Grupa 2005: 72) result in the relatively smaller and more

modest decorative art or was it rather the outcome of the fact that a child was perceived as a delicate creature? We can also presume that as a rule the coffin was chosen by a child's parents. Unlike the adults, children did not leave any last wills and directives concerning the burials and form of the funeral ceremonies.

SUMMARY

Examining the excavated artefacts, we are able to discover much information concerning a child's life. Fortunately, the history of modern times is supported by written sources, which, thanks to the cooperation of historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, anthropologists and researchers representing other branches of science, can lead to more complete knowledge on the conditions of bringing up children, their toys, clothes, circumstances of death and the funeral ceremonies themselves. The results of this study are extremely interesting, as they have produced on the basis of the source material (coffins) a picture of mutual adult – child relations. It was the parent who decided on the kind of burial ceremony, who chose the coffin. What reasons guided him? Did he obey the sumptuary regulations or did he act against them, easing the pain and grief after his descendant's loss by preparing a rich funeral? What made him choose the kind of this 'final garment' for his child? The researchers still have a number of questions to answer, but the first attempts at unravelling these mysteries have been made.

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