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Two Swedish Late Modern Period fetal burial shrouds

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Abstract

The discovery in 2015 of a concealed coffined fetal burial under the floorboards of Gällared Church (Medieval/1831) in Southwest Sweden initiated the systematic study of the coffin and its contents and a search for comparative burials. The find is witness to the now-forgotten custom in Nordic Europe of burying fetal remains in small boxes and deliberately concealing them in or around churches in the hope that these tiny unbaptized souls enter the kingdom of heaven. There is scant comparative material because such finds are not common in museum collections. However, in 1992 a small lidded wooden box that had been retrieved from an interior wall of Bringetofta Church (12th century/1754) in South Sweden entered the collections of Jönköpings County Museum. Not only did both these small boxes contain the naturally mummified skeletal remains of early term fetuses but both individuals had been wrapped in their own textile shroud. This paper compares the two shrouds in terms of the textiles and how they were fashioned into shrouds, how they contributed to the post-mortem preservation of the fetuses and, finally, the insight they provide into this particular ritual as a strategy for coping with loss, grief, and transition.

Keywords: burial shroud, burial rituals, fetal human remains natural mummification, Sweden

21.1. Introduction

The discovery in 2015 of a concealed coffined fetal burial under the floorboards of Gällared Parish Church (Halland) in Southwest Sweden in connection with building restoration, initiated not only the systematic study of the coffin, its contents and the cultural practices relating to funerary practices of pre-term and unbaptised individuals in the late modern period, but also a search for comparative burials. There is scant comparative material. Finds of these fetal boxes are under-reported and rarely make their way into museum collections. However, it transpired that in 1992, a small lidded wooden box that had been retrieved from a deep crack in an interior wall of Bringetofta Parish Church (Småland) was handed over to Jönköping County Museum (Accession No. JM42155-7). Interestingly, Bringetofta is located in South Sweden, and the box was discovered also in connection with building restoration.

In both instances, when discovered, the possible nature of these boxes and their contents was not recognised. Assuming the Gällared box was empty, the workers removed the lid, which proved easy because the nails had rusted through, to discover a piece of folded cloth wrapped around what were suspected to be skeletal remains. Almost immediately after its discovery, it became clear that the box was a coffin and the textile a burial shroud, and the find was handled accordingly by Kulturmiljö Halland (Tegnhed 2016). In the case of the Bringetofta box, it was not opened on-site, but first at Jönköping's Museum. Prior to opening, it was conjectured that it might be a medieval reliquary or an attempt to ward off the Devil from the church by concealing a bat in a wall (Londos 1995). It was some time before the true nature of the Bringetofta box – also the coffin of a miscarried fetus – was established.

Not only did both these two small boxes contain the naturally mummified skeletal remains of early term fetuses, but both individuals were wrapped in their own textile shroud. This chapter introduces the study of these two finds – in particular, the well-preserved burial shrouds. It compares and contrasts the two shrouds in terms of the textiles: how they were fashioned into a shroud; how they contributed to the post-mortem preservation of the fetuses and, finally, the insight they provide into this particular ritual as a strategy for coping with loss, grief, and transition.



21.2. Background

The two villages of Gällared and Bringetofta are located about 150 km from one another and both coffins are dated to the late 18th to early 19th century (Figure 1). The white-plastered graystone rural parish church in Gällared, Sweden dates to the Medieval period (Nilsson 2002; 2009: 358). Following several decades of serious disrepair in the late 18th and early 19th century, it was rebuilt and extended in 1831 (Karlsson 1982). During restoration building works within the church in 2015, the builders accidentally discovered a tiny, lidded wooden box sitting on building rubble directly underneath the floorboards (Tegnhed 2016: 8–9). It has since been concluded that the box most likely was concealed during the original laying of the new floor in 1831 (Tegnhed 2016: 8–9).

Figure 1. Map of Scandinavia indicating the location of the villages of Gällared and Bringetofta in South Sweden. (Map: A. Andersson, Kulturmiljö Halland)

The parish church in rural Bringetofta (Småland) also is a white-plastered graystone structure and also dates to the Medieval period. It was remodeled in the mid-18th century with the addition of a wooden nave at the north end. During building restoration works within the church in 1992, a small, lidded wooden box was found in a crack in the wall of the attic. It is judged that the box was concealed in the late 18th century or during the first half of the 19th century (Londos 1995).

The find circumstances and the immediate post-discovery handling and care of these two small coffins and their contents varied. The medieval Gällared church had been extensively rebuilt in 1831, but the extent of remaining medieval building features, especially foundations, was not known. Consequently, the 2015 restoration work was monitored by an archaeological watching brief undertaken by Kulturmiljö Halland (Tegnhed 2016). The immediate post-recovery find circumstances of the Bringetofta coffin prior to entering the collections of Jönköping County Museum are not documented. It is not known whether there was a watching brief. When handed over, the lidded box was intact and sealed with two wooden pegs, and it was opened at the museum in the presence of a human osteologist. When the lid was removed, a hard crumpled pressed linen cloth was exposed that, when it was unfolded, turned out to contain skeletal fragments (Londos 1995). The osteologist concluded that the skeletal elements were not human, but from an animal.

21.3. The coffins and their contents

21.3.1. The skeletal remains

The osteological examination of the ossified skeletal parts from both coffins undertaken in the present study revealed they were very well preserved and that much of the material was partially mummified. There are no traces of pathological changes to the parts of either individual.

Upon examination and opening-up of the folded-over fabric, the Gällared remains were found in approximate anatomical arrangement adhering to one another and the fabric with dried connective tissue, which greatly aided the identification of the remains. The fetal remains constitute 23 tiny bones. It was concluded that the fetus was miscarried in its first trimester, in week 9, which makes it possible this is one of the youngest recovered from an archaeological context to be reported (Maltin et al. 2021a).

Although the Bringetofta skeletal fragments are very thin and fragile, the skeleton is relatively complete with the exception that most of the vertebrae and the remains of one forearm are missing. After the coffin was opened, these became the subject of osteological analysis by several specialists and at numerous institutions to identify the nature of the remains (Londos 1995). A chiropterologist (bat specialist) concluded that the remains were not that of a bat, but rather a rodent, perhaps a black rat. Another consultation concluded that it was a four-legged mammal. Finally, it was ascertained that it was most likely the skeletal remains were that of a human fetus aged 13–18 weeks (Londos 1995). The Bringetofta remains were subjected to osteological examination as part of the present study (Maltin et al. 2021b). As was the case for the Gällared remains, these had adhering fragments of dried connective tissue. It was confirmed to be a human fetus that miscarried early in its second trimester, in week 13 (Maltin 2020).

21.3.2. The coffins

Both undecorated coffins are complete and were intact when discovered (Figure 2). They are rectangular, constructed of pine, and are in good condition with no sign of past damp, soil staining or biological attack. The Gällared box (10.7x6.8x5.3 cm) is made of coarse wood, probably scrap

pieces, and joined together with now-corroded iron nails (Figure 2a). It seems to have been hand-made by someone who lacked woodworking skills. The larger box (15x6x6 cm) from Bringetofta is finely constructed of thin pieces of pine, nicely designed, and joined together into a trapezoidal-form coffin with the help of wooden plugs (Figure 2b). Prior to opening, a gap in the lid revealed light-coloured fabric inside (Londons 1995). The 9-week-old Gällared fetus would have measured around 6–7 cm in length, and the 13-week-old Bringetofta fetus would have measured around 9 cm. Both coffins were well dimensioned, to comfortably accommodate the fetuses. It is considered that both coffins were specifically constructed to house these fetuses.



Figure 2. a) The lidded coffin (10.7x6.8x5.3 cm) from Gällared church. b) The lidded coffin (15x6x6 cm) from Bringetofta church. (Photographs: A. Andersson, Kulturmiljö Halland; A. Hovlin, Jönköpings läns museum)

21.3.3. The textile shrouds

The Gällared shroud has not been subjected to any conservation treatment. It is not known whether the Bringetofta was conserved; however, its present condition suggests not. The Gällared textile shroud (see Peacock et al. 2020), measures 14.7x8.5 cm, is intact, and in good condition (Figure 3). It is rectangular in shape, with single-fold, turned-under edges, on all sides, and weighs 3 g. The raw edges are straight and were scissor-cut prior to being turned under. The fabric is a regular diagonal 2/2 twill in undyed cotton with a thread count of 19–22 threads per cm in both the warp and weft directions. The textile's quality and use of the same yarn in both the warp and weft points to it being handwoven, and most likely the product of household textile production. There are no selvages on the textile. The single-spun threads range in thickness from 0.25–0.9 mm with a medium (20–30° angle) Z-direction twist. The single-fold turned-under edges are 0.5–0.7 cm wide and were fastened with a whipstitch using a linen thread. These edges now have a scalloped contour from the stitching and there are remnants of the thread in the stitch holes. There are two small, embroidered circles next to one another coarsely stitched onto the fabric in the same sewing thread. These could be laundry marks (Jane Malcolm-Davies, pers. com. 27 May 2020).

The interior face of the burial shroud is lightly stained along one half – probably fluid from the fetus. The preserved skeletal remains were stuck to this face in approximate anatomical arrangement adhering to the fabric with dried connective tissue. The light staining indicates that the fetus was



Figure 3. The burial shroud (14.7x8.5 cm) that was used to wrap the Gällared fetus. The folded shroud (above), and the unfolded shroud (below) illustrating the stained area and embroidery on the interior face. (Photographs: E. Peacock, NTNU)

washed – and perhaps dried – prior to being wrapped. The white rectangular Gällared burial shroud was fashioned with carefully hemmed cut edges from a textile that was, judging from the embroidery, probably from re-purposed clothing or household linen, but not worn-out broken-down cloth.

The Bringetofta wrapping is a much larger piece of textile measuring 30x55 cm (Figure 4). It is an extensively crumpled, linen-colored piece of repaired and fragmentary worn-out cloth that is discoloured and dirty with areas of compacted soiling. It would have been tightly crumpled around the fetus and pressed into the coffin in order to have fit. It has been identified to be a long-sleeve, baby-size smock-dress with opening in the back, which was common in the 18th century (Londos 1995).



Figure 4. The interior face of the Bringetofta burial shroud (30x55 cm). The stained area is in the centre of the textile. (Photograph: A. Hovlin, Jönköpings läns museum)

The fabric is a plain weave in linen with a thread count of four to six threads per cm in the weft direction and twelve to fourteen threads per cm in the warp direction. There are numerous areas where two yarns have been woven in by mistake. The fabric's quality and varying thickness of the threads point to it being handwoven, and the product of household textile production. The single-spun threads range widely in thickness from 0.3 to 2.6 mm with a varying Z-direction twist for the weft threads, to 0.3 to 0.6 mm and a tight (circa 45° angle) Z-direction twist for the warp threads. The warp threads are uniform in thickness, while the weft threads vary widely in thickness. Some of the finished edges are rolled and fastened with a half whipstitch. When new the fabric would have been lightweight and soft. The current condition of the fabric varies widely from good near some of the seams and sewn edges to stretched out in the body and badly broken down with threads missing along some edges. The fabric's plain weave is much less robust and able to withstand wear-and-tear than a twill weave.

On the interior face of the smock is an area with rust-colored discolorations – probably fluid or blood from the fetus. Additionally, there are small bone fragments and what is probably dried-out tissue from the fetus. Because the crumpled garment was not flattened out prior to being taken into use to wrap the fetus, the rust-stained areas are not evenly distributed and cover an area of the garment much larger than the fetus. The rust-staining is dark and indicates that the fetus was damp and not washed prior to being wrapped. The garment appears to have been refashioned and repaired during its period of use. This is witnessed by the nicely done seams along the lower edges and the clumsy, coarse seams around the neck and sleeve. Only one sleeve remains, and this suggests that the smock had already been discarded as a garment. There is no indication that the smock was in any way specifically re-purposed for use as a shroud and that, perhaps, its use as a shroud was hastily organized.

21.4. Discussion

21.4.1. Circumstances and nature of preservation (see Maltin et al. 2021a)

Both burial shrouds witness the nature of and contributed to the preservation of the fetal corpses. The 9-week and 13-week bodies would have had no gut flora to putrefy upon death (Burcham and Jordan 2017), nor had direct contact with bacteria from soil (Turner-Walker 2019). They became naturally mummified by the principal mechanism of desiccation. This is indicated by the presence of minute fragments of dried tissue on and the adhesion of the skeletal parts to the burial shrouds, especially the Gällared shroud. Together with the natural moisture-wicking properties of plant fibres (e.g., cotton and linen), the burial shrouds were well-suited to transport moisture, including body fluids, away from the fetal bodies, which contain over 90% water (Moulton 1923: Table 1). The wrappings will have facilitated the drying out of the soft tissue and brought about relatively widespread desiccation of the corpses. The signs of liquid staining on the shrouds confirms the dissipation of fluids leaking from the fetuses (Aufderheide 2003: 303). This would have been assisted by resting in the wooden coffins and being placed in a cool, dry, above-ground environment. The exterior and interior colour and condition of the wood of the two coffins evidences a relatively stable and undisturbed environment over the 200-year history of their concealment. Initially, the wrapping of the fetuses in the shrouds would have protected the fetuses from access of insects once in the coffin. With time, it restricted the scattering of the skeletal parts as the bodies decomposed and, for the Gällared find, led to its remains retaining the anatomically correct position of the fetal skeleton (Duday 2009). The formable textile wrappings protected the bodies and the rigid wooden coffin – also a wrapping – protected the wrapped bodies (Douny and Harris 2014).

21.4.2. *Comparative material*

There is scant comparative physical material. Only a few boxes and coffins have been documented or made their way into museum collections. It is feasible there are more, yet unidentified fetal coffins in both museum collections and parish churches. There are three boxes in the collections of the Nordic Museum, Stockholm (Kätterström Höök 2015): NM.0285614+, NM.0285615+ and NM.0285616+, and eight in the collections of the University Museum of Bergen, Norway (Magnussen 2005).

The practice of secretly burying fetuses in small boxes within a church or walls of the consecrated graveyard surrounding the church was common in Scandinavia and ranged from the Medieval period to the mid-20th century (Jonsson 2006; Magnussen 2005). Innumerable churches in Norway and Sweden that responded to an extensive survey undertaken by Bø and Lid (Bø 1960) in 1953 provided accounts of such finds. The custom was well known in rural areas in the mid-20th century and, when discovered, these boxes were recognised as coffins and there was no reason to open and examine the contents. The further fate of many of these was to be discarded or burned; however, more often they were reinterred. This burial tradition is no longer in the collective memory. This was supported by an informal correspondence and conversations with practicing osteologists and several archaeologists representing universities, museums and forensic institutes in Scandinavia and the UK. Of the nineteen respondents, many stated that they encountered graves with small children or third trimester fetuses in both cemeteries and inside churches. However, fewer than five were aware of the tradition of secretly burying small fetuses within churches or churchyard walls (Peacock et al. 2020).

The burial containers range from small homemade boxes, to secondary use of various types of packaging such as cigar boxes, butter boxes, matchboxes, pieces of cloth, and newspaper. Examination of the skeletal remains of both individuals highlighted the difficulty of identifying and ageing early-stage fetal skeletons and the paucity of comparative material, especially in the case of the Gällared fetus. Many of the containers in museum collections do not contain skeletal remains. Osteological examination is reported for only the Bringetofta fetus (Londos 1995; Maltin et al. 2021b).

There is even less comparative textile material. Similarly, it is only the Bringetofta shroud for which textile analysis has been reported (Londos 1995; Maltin et al. 2021). Reports of box contents, when investigated, describe remains packed or rolled in a piece of textile (Sellevold 2008: 18, 19, 23) or wrapped in a white cloth (Magnussen 2005). Kätterström Höök (2015) reports there are no skeletal remains in the coffins in the Nordic Museum but that one (NM.0285615+) contains flax and cotton fibres. One exception is a matchbox 'coffin' in the Bergen University Museum collections that, in addition to containing a white cloth, was itself packed in a white cloth (Magnussen 2005: Fig. 4; Østigård 2009). Visual inspection of an image of the cloth (Østigård 2009) suggests that the fabric is similar to the Gällared burial shroud in that it is a white, diagonal 2/2 twill of medium quality. The fibre could not be identified. A dearth of secret fetal coffin textile wrappings hampers further comparative technical study; however, the state of preservation of both the Gällared and Bringetofta shrouds do provide insight into the funerary behaviour afforded the miscarried fetuses.

21.4.3. *Insight into funerary behaviour*

The two small specially constructed boxes contain the naturally mummified remains of early term fetuses, each wrapped in its own textile shroud. The shrouds contrast markedly between the carefully fashioned Gällared textile and the castoff Bringetofta smock. Both burial treatments bear evidence of a complex material language heavily imbued with cultural meanings and values (Mui 2015). They were not simply to accomplish the removal of the decaying remains, but to provide as decent and appropriate a burial as possible under the circumstances. On the one hand, the Gällared shroud was carefully fashioned from a re-purposed, lightly used textile with carefully hemmed edges, and the coffin was crudely constructed. On the other hand, the Bringetofta coffin was finely constructed,

but the shroud was torn and dirty with no indication that it had been in any way specifically repurposed for use as a shroud. The baby-size smock might have been a haphazard solution improvised through resourcefulness or necessity (Cannon and Cook 2015). Alternatively, it might previously have belonged to another child in the household and had deep emotional significance. The parents (mourners) made conscious decisions about the manner in which the deceased fetuses were treated and arrangements for their emotionally motivated illicit internment in sacred areas of the parish churches. Such burials constituted a transgression of official Church regulations. These burials challenged their children's damnation, and represent an expression of strategy for coping with and managing loss, grief, and transition.

21.5. Epilogue

The Gällared and Bringetofta secretly buried coffin finds are witness to the now-forgotten custom in Nordic Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries of burying miscarried fetal remains in small boxes and deliberately concealing them in or around churches in the hope that these tiny, unbaptised souls could come to the kingdom of heaven. This was despite the fact that such action went against the church's strict rules. The now-discovered coffins and their contents have met widely different fates. The Gällared fetal remains have been rewrapped in their shroud, returned to their coffin, and placed in a specially designed accessible enclosure under the new floor in Gällared church. The lidded Bringetofta coffin was sealed when it entered the collections of Jönköping Museum. Currently, the shroud and skeletal elements are housed in the museum's storerooms, and the coffin is on display in the museum's galleries.

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