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## **“...a Gentle Calm and Happy Resurrection” – Theological and Folk-religious Backgrounds of Crypt Burials**

If one tries to understand the mentality of our Christian ancestors and the way they buried their dead, we need to move away from the contemporary perspective of religious abstraction.

In fact, the body of the risen Christ, and thus our own body, is at the centre of Christian eschatology. The oldest Christian testimony in which the resurrection is thematised is Paulus’ first letter to the Thessalonians, probably dated around 50 A.D., which speaks of the “Son whom God raised from the dead” (1 Th 1,10). In the first letter to the Corinthians, probably written five years later, Paulus writes: *But if Christ is not risen, our preaching is in vain, your faith is also in vain... For if the dead are not risen, Christ is not risen either* (1 Cor 14–16).

In the two thousand years that have passed since then, the bodily resurrection has never been doubted by the official dogmatic guideline of the Catholic Church, but has been confirmed in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century: *The resurrected body is the same body as that which belonged to the soul in earth life* (cf. Ratzinger 1957: 1042)<sup>1</sup>. However, the protestant theology of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the forced or self-chosen turning away of large parts of mankind from the religious led to a “disenchantment of the world”, as Max Weber felt (1992: 46). The thorough demythologization of the New Testament by an increasing materialism in the period after the Enlightenment and especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also made many believers understand the miracles of Christ only in symbolic parables. In comparison to the words of the Bible, now a resurrection can

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1 As Pope Benedict XVI., he reaffirmed this dogma in 2013.

still be hoped for, but only of the immortal soul. It remains to assume that until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the belief in a bodily resurrection was only doubted by an intellectual elite. Those whose bodies rest in the tombs of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries have never questioned the resurrection of the flesh, in accordance to the bodily resurrection of Christ. Given this religious background, the object of research is somewhat more complicated.

In order to understand the phenomenon of crypt burials, aspects of religion, estates, families and socio-historical backgrounds must be examined. Unfortunately, ethical points of view are often not taken into account. Most of the crypt mummies, when known, are today not placed into the religious context of their time, but are marketed, as “biological miracles”, like the so-called “Knight Kahlbutz” in Kampehl, a small town in the north-west of Berlin. This nobleman died in 1702, was buried in the church crypt and mummified naturally. Today, his body is well-preserved, due to the ventilation inside the crypt. But many myths were developed around the conjunction of his bad behaviour in lifetime and his body’s preservation after death. His body, like many other crypt mummies, has been scientifically studied. Other examples are the mummies in the crypts of Illmersdorf (Brandenburg) and Nedlitz (Saxony-Anhalt)<sup>2</sup>. Some scientists have drawn parallels to the independent tradition of mummification in early modern Catholic Italy, for example in Palermo, Savoca and Venzone. Especially in the “Catacombe dei Cappuccini” in Palermo the dead were visited by their relatives and it is for this purpose that their bodies were artificially mummified. However, these customs are not comparable with the Central, Eastern and Northern European burial culture, where the corpses rest in double-sealed coffins. Here, the coffins were not opened after the funeral; the corpses were not exhibited.

Furthermore, representative aspects form an essential part of this burial culture. The social status – achieved or inherited – in life is also reflected in the burial sites. A family grave on one’s own land or the patronage church was, comparable with the patronage or princely lodges and the epitaphs in the church, a visible monument of a dynastic and pecuniary founded self-confidence. Family crypts offered the possibility of representing power and prosperity over several generations through splendidly designed epitaphs, crypt portals and in some cases the display of precious sarcophagi. The statement of these monuments is: we are here, we have been here for a long time and we will stay here.

The consideration of family aspects is of great importance for the understanding of crypts. Even if death causes a gap in the family structure, it is partly closed

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2 In Nedlitz, Amelie Alterauge (University of Bern) discovered an allegedly female mummy to be that of a man (Alterauge 2019). A look at the clothing shows the same result, since the mummy is dressed in a typical men’s housecoat from around 1800.

by the reunification of all family members at the grave. "Ancestor samples", i.e. proofs of ancestry with a large number of coats of arms, were used to prove the famous origin and the importance of each individual of that very family (Fig. 1). The building of such a family tomb secured the *memoria*, more precisely the honourable memory of the family members for future times.



**Fig. 1.** Coffin of Augusta von Rantzau (deceased 1667) with proof of ancestry in Dänischenhagen near Kiel (Schleswig-Holstein) (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).

Every death is terrible for relatives, but whose heritage is living in the memory of one's descendants, like it is in the case of Maria Luise Albertine von Leiningen-Dagsburg-Falkenburg (died 1818), can die in peace. She was the grandmother of Queen Luise, the so-called and beloved "Queen of Hearts". Her coffin stands in the crypt of the family von Mecklenburg-Strelitz in the Johanniterkirche (church of the order of St. John) in Mirow (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). The inscription on it makes impressively clear that the impact of the individual's death to its family is only eased by the individual's – and therefore family's – progeny: "The widowed Countess of Hesse-Darmstadt, born imperial countess of Leiningen-Dagsburg and Broich, who is resting here in God, had 9 children in her marriage and had the rare luck of experiencing 24 grandchildren and 12 grandchildren-in-law of these and three sons-in-law, 56 great-grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren-in-law and 11 great-grandchildren of these. All in all 122; which they were allowed to call mother. She was loved and honoured by all, as she had earned it abundantly".



**Fig. 2.** Funeral wreath of the von Bünau family vault in Burkhardswalde near Pirna (Saxonia), 17<sup>th</sup> century (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).

Medieval and early modern society in Europe was strongly interwoven with religious and moral backgrounds. Consequently, the concern for the dead as one of the Seven Works of Mercy according to the catechetical tradition of the Church is central. Even the youngest deceased individuals are lovingly cared for. Their funeral wreaths are among the most conspicuous and frequent burial objects (Fig. 2). They were given to unmarried deceased persons of both sexes and both confessions, Catholic as well as Protestant, regardless of the individual's age, as a substitute for a wedding that had not taken place in life or for a "heavenly wedding". These fragile structures of mostly non-ferrous metal wires, sequins as well as fabric or paper blossoms are mainly documented for the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.



**Fig. 3.** Coffin of Ottilia Elisabeth von Bismarck (deceased 1695) in the Wunderblutkirche ("Miracle Blood Church") in Bad Wilsnack (Brandenburg) (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).



**Fig. 4.** Quote from the Bible, Job 19,25–27; on the cemetery gate (1542) in Eislefeld (Thuringia) (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).

Roses, as a symbol of love, were placed on the corpse or painted on the coffin. The rose-shaped handles attached to the coffin of Ottilia Elisabeth von Bismarck, who died in 1695, buried in the Wunderblutkirche in Bad Wilsnack (Brandenburg) are absolutely unique (Fig. 3).

As stated above, our modern, almost clinical perspective has made us forget the immense importance of religion and belief in earlier times. In almost every tomb we encounter the Bible quotation Job 19,25 to 27: *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another* (Fig. 4). Even though Luther translated it wrongly here (the passage should actually be translated as *and after this my skin is shattered, I will see God without my flesh*, which would correspond to a purely spiritual resurrection), his version was nevertheless received vividly in the early modern burial culture. Basically, every Christian tomb and crypt is a place of resurrection. As already mentioned at the beginning: It is also always about the physical resurrection. This is as well confirmed by the quotation in Ezekiel 37,4 to 6, which can be found less frequently on the coffins, but also here the physical resurrection from



**Fig. 5.** Mummy from storage with poor ventilation, Parochialkirche (Berlin), burial from the Biedermeier era (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).



**Fig. 6.** Mummy from storage with good ventilation, Parochialkirche (Berlin), burial from the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).

the bones is invoked<sup>3</sup>. The pictures of the Last Judgement, where people crawl out of their graves like cockchafers, are well known. They collect their bones together in order to be able to resurrect completely on the great day. The painting of the

<sup>3</sup> *Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the lord.*

Last Judgement of Jehan Bellegambe<sup>4</sup> focuses on the reconstruction of the body. Here an angel assembles the body of a resurrected man who, still drowsy, raises his head in the direction of Christ as judge of the world.

Then the question arises whether the preservation of the bodies in the tombs was intended. In general, organic materials inside crypts are preserved if these are well ventilated (Fig. 5 and 6). This circumstance has led to the fact that in European tombs there are hundreds of naturally mummified individuals; and only 100 years ago there were probably thousands. If ventilation is interrupted, the corpses disintegrate. Many of the mummies have been damaged or are now completely skeletonized. One of the reasons is the blocking of existing ventilation systems by improper bricklaying and clogging of the openings.



**Fig. 7.** Mummy of Caroline von der Wense (deceased 1838) in Lüneburg with cross-shaped section cuts (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).

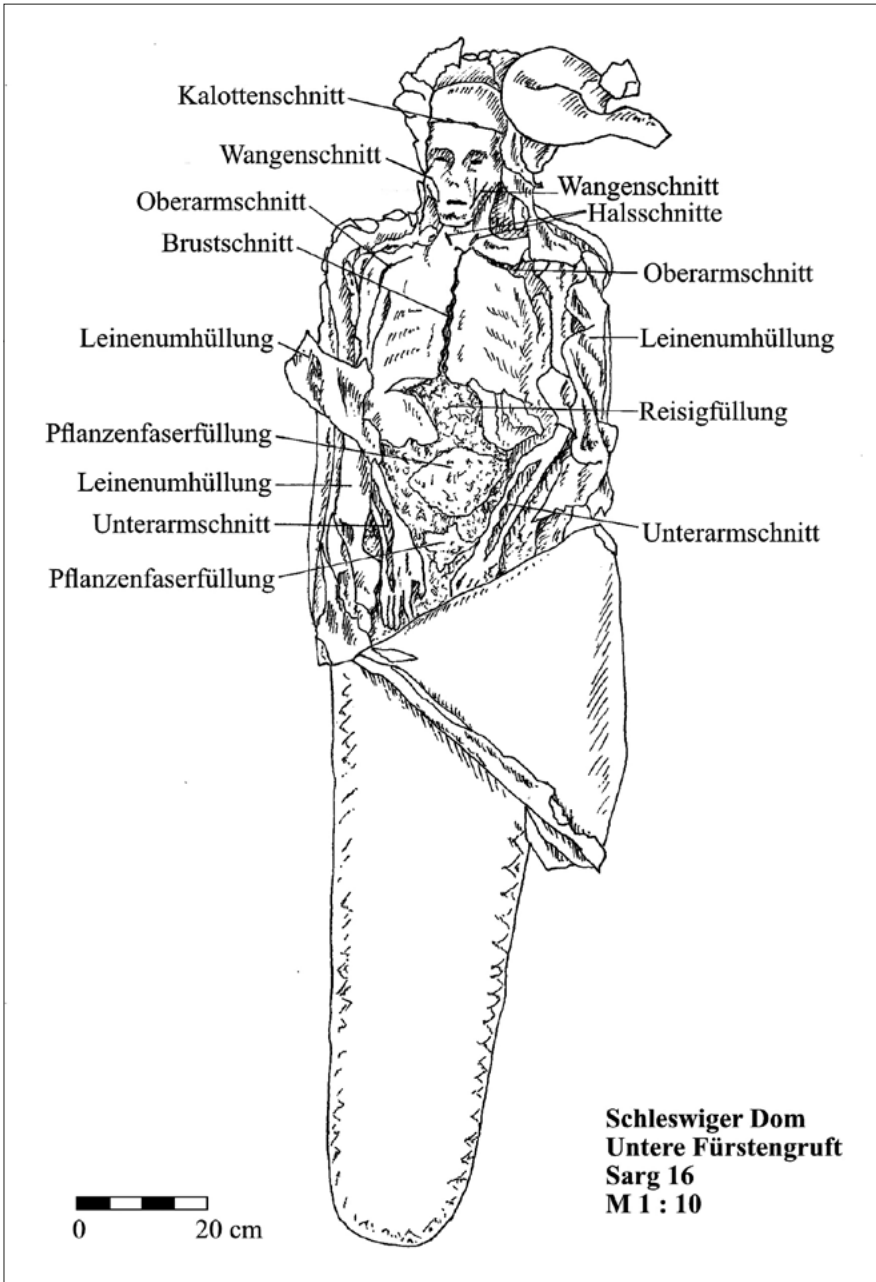
Plundering, above all in the past 70 years, thus in the time after the Second World War, caused enormous damages, and in the consequence many of the once so well-preserved corpses were cremated.

The aforementioned natural mummification is enhanced by an appropriate bedding of the corpses. Hop bedding is particularly suitable, as hop flowers are absorbent and further also antibacterial and antifungal. Last but not least, hop was used among the living as a barbiturate, thus in the coffin providing a good sleep for the deceased, which did last, in accordance to Luther's perception, until the day of resurrection.

Corpses were often opened in preparation of burials and transfers of coffins with corpses inside.

In the case of the abbess Caroline von der Wense, who died in July 1838 in the Lüne monastery in Lüneburg, and was not the slimmest, the organs had been removed in order to make the

4 Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie.



**Fig. 8.** Mummy of Friedrich, Prince of Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorf (deceased 1654 in Paris) with the section cuts (prepared by Forschungsstelle Gruft, Lübeck).



presentation of the body during the funerary rituals more pleasant (Fig. 7). Cross and double cross sections were also carried out in the abdominal regions of two corpses buried in the princely tomb at Mirow. Sometimes many days or weeks passed until the whole family had gathered from the Reich to say farewell. For example, six days passed between the death of Grand Duke Georg von Mecklenburg-Strelitz on 6 September 1860 and his funeral on 13 September. He had ordered the opening of his corpse in his will, and this should also prove helpful for the public presentation of his body during the funerary ceremony. Duke Adolf of Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorf died in 1631 after the Battle of Breitenfeld (Saxony) in the Thirty Years' War, and had to be transferred from Eilenburg, about 18 days away, to Schleswig. This would not have been possible without extensive conservation carried out before the transfer, until today body and clothing are very well preserved. A more detailed investigation of the conservation measures is still pending. This also applies to the corpse of Friedrich von Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorf, who died in 1654 at the age of 19 during his cavalier tour in Paris (Fig. 8). The body got artfully prepared. Numerous sewn cuts all over the body testify to the systematic approach to draining the body. The cuts can be seen on the head, neck, arms, chest and stomach. The abdominal cavity then got filled with an aromatic mixture of plant parts and a bulky filling of a yet undetermined material. The corpse was then finally wrapped in coarse linen, placed into a transport coffin, which then was soldered. The thus sealed ensemble was transferred to the ceremonial place or finally into the burial crypt, and there placed into the outer coffin.

This special process of getting rid of the corpse's liquids, applied here, is well described in the relevant literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The French military surgeon Ambroise Paré is regarded as the father of modern surgery, and was the personal physician of the French kings Henri II, Francois II, Charles IX and Henri III. He also developed a successful method for preserving corpses. In his 1594 posthumous publication *Opera chirurgica*, Paré complains about the unsuccessful conservation methods of his time.

He had developed an own method, that required the removal of the intestines, deep cuttings in the muscles and then to place the body in a wooden tub with a solution of vinegar, aloe, wormwood, coloquines and alcohol. After three weeks of leaving the body in this liquid, he allowed the body to dry in a ventilated place, thus preserving it successfully for the period of public display of the corpse and the subsequent transfer to the final resting place, assuring a worthy dealing with the body.

None of the doctors or embalmers like Paré intended to make mummies. Moreover, nobody from the noble families ever opened a screwed coffin and, noticed how well the mummification succeeded. These crypt mummies described here are the result of preparations related to the public display of the deceased

during the funerary ceremonies and the subsequent transfer of the body to the crypt. The coffins did serve as an ornamental armour for the deceased, the graves being the places where they wanted to be kept until the Last Judgement. Mummified or skeletonized, God will reassemble them all. Only physical completeness should be guaranteed. This is the reason why the Catholic rejection of cremation in particular is partly to the present day. The inference is therefore that there is no European tradition of mummification in the narrower sense, as for example in Egypt or in the Italian examples.

After decades of tomb investigations in Northern and Central Europe, nowadays also the socio-historical background of the early modern tombs is taken into consideration during their investigation. Their numerous occurrences, especially from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, seem to be connected with social upheavals that would go beyond the scope of this description. It is a combination of several factors that caused a period of crisis; such as the Reformation with its general religious insecurity, the Thirty Years War with its social and religious consequences, epidemics and famine years, which in turn are related to the climate changes caused by the Little Ice Age. A comprehensive publication on this topic is in preparation. It is not only about saving graves and tombs, but also about interpreting them correctly.

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## Summary

### "...a Gentle Calm and Happy Resurrection" – Theological and Folk-religious Backgrounds of Crypt Burials

For years there has been a lively discussion if there did exist a tradition of intentional mummification in Christian Europe, since hundreds of naturally mummified individuals of a social elite have been found preserved in family- and church crypts. But in most cases well ventilated crypt spaces are the reason for this natural mummification. Besides their dynastic and representative nature, crypts with the well closed coffins were probably understood as spaces of protection for a facilitated resurrection of the body at the day of judgement. Physical resurrection was church-dogmatical from the beginning of Christianity until 20<sup>th</sup> century and as well a private religious fact. Numerous inscriptions on

coffins and crypt walls testify the hope of a "happy resurrection". The believe in resurrection is common for all confessions, though it is probably Protestantism that has promoted burials in crypts. But only the comprehension of the interaction of different social and religious aspects opens the access to the complex "crypt".

**Keywords:** crypt, mummification, resurrection, theological background

## Streszczenie

**„...łagodne, spokojne i szczęśliwe zmartwychwstanie” – teologiczny i związany z religią naturalną wymiar pochówków w kryptach**

Od lat trwa ożywiona dyskusja na temat tego, czy w chrześcijańskiej Europie istniała tradycja celowych mumifikacji, jako że w kryptach rodzinnych i kościelnych odnaleziono setki naturalnie zmumifikowanych ciał przedstawicieli elit społecznych. W większości przypadków jednak powodem tego typu naturalnych mumifikacji była dobra wentylacja krypt. Poza swym dynastycznym i reprezentatywnym charakterem, krypty ze szczelnie zamkniętymi trumnami prawdopodobnie rozumiano jako przestrzenie ochronne, mające ułatwić wskrzeszenie ciała w dniu ostatecznym. Fizyczne zmartwychwstanie stanowiło dogmat od początku chrześcijaństwa do XX w., jak również fakt religii naturalnej. Wiele inskrypcji na trumnach i ścianach krypt świadczy o nadziei na „szczęśliwe zmartwychwstanie”. Wiara w zmartwychwstanie jest powszechna dla wszystkich wyznań, choć prawdopodobnie to protestantyzm rozpowszechnił pochówki w kryptach. Jednakże dostęp do złożoności „krypty” uzyskać można wyłącznie poprzez zrozumienie interakcji między różnymi aspektami społecznymi i religijnymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** krypta (rodzinna), mumifikacja, zmartwychwstanie, kontekst teologiczny

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