

Małgorzata Grupa<sup>1</sup>, Krzysztof Jasiak<sup>2</sup>,  
Dawid Grupa<sup>3</sup>, Filip Nalaskowski<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Szosa Bydgoska 44/48, 87-100 Toruń, Poland;  
e-mail: m.grupa@wp.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-5128-9754

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Szosa Bydgoska 44/48, 87-100 Toruń, Poland;  
e-mail: kjasia452@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0001-6304-7947

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Archaeology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Szosa Bydgoska 44/48, 87-100 Toruń, Poland;  
e-mail: d.m.grupa@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0002-6393-8528

<sup>4</sup> Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Yuri Gagarin 11, 87-100 Toruń, Poland;  
e-mail: filipn@umk.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-6973-9960

## A Child's Grave Robe from the Northern Crypt of St Anne's Church in Konotop, Lubuskie Province, Poland

### Abstract

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An ossuary was found in a brass sarcophagus, dated to 1720 based on a medallion. The archaeological material was mixed with rubbish and sand. Inside the sarcophagus, the remains of both adults and children were discovered. These are believed to be members of the von Kottwitz family, former owners of Konotop. The separation of the material into different types of cloth was quite painstaking and lengthy. Only one of the grave robes has survived in an almost intact condition. It was a simple grave robe without a back. During the analysis of the skeletal remains, it was matched to the red stained skeleton of an infant.

**Keywords:** crypt, child, funeral dress, silk, modern period, Konotop, Poland

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### Introduction

In October 2021, during research in the northern crypt of St. Anne's Church in Konotop, a metal sarcophagus dating to 1720 was discovered (Fig. 1, 2), in which an ossuary was found. During the exploration of the sarcophagus, human remains belonging to at least six people were removed (the precise number of skeletons will only be known after detailed anthropological analysis), together with fragments of silk fabrics, wooden coffins, and rubbish.

### Research methods

Among the fabrics, at least four types could be distinguished and which is only a prelude to further research. The fabrics were placed in thick plastic bags

to prevent drying. Despite the involvement of students in the research, all staff involved in work in the crypt had completed a course in the conservation of archaeological artifacts. There were no problems in protecting either the botanical samples or the fabrics found. Their contact with atmospheric conditions was limited by placing the textiles in bags. Any change in the humidity in textiles leads to the decomposition of the fibers, which can eventually lead to further damage (Drażkowska and Grupa 1998, 121–124; Grupa 2007, 209–212; Grupa *et al.* 2015, 41). Due to the chemical structure of the fibers, silk fabrics are susceptible to damage caused by radiation, especially ultraviolet – the fibers are significantly weakened and become brittle and yellow, so they should be protected from both natural and artificial light. Although silk is believed to be resistant to fungi and most bacteria, its accumula-



Fig. 1. General view with metal sarcophagus and relics of wooden coffins with rubbish (photo by J. Gawroński).

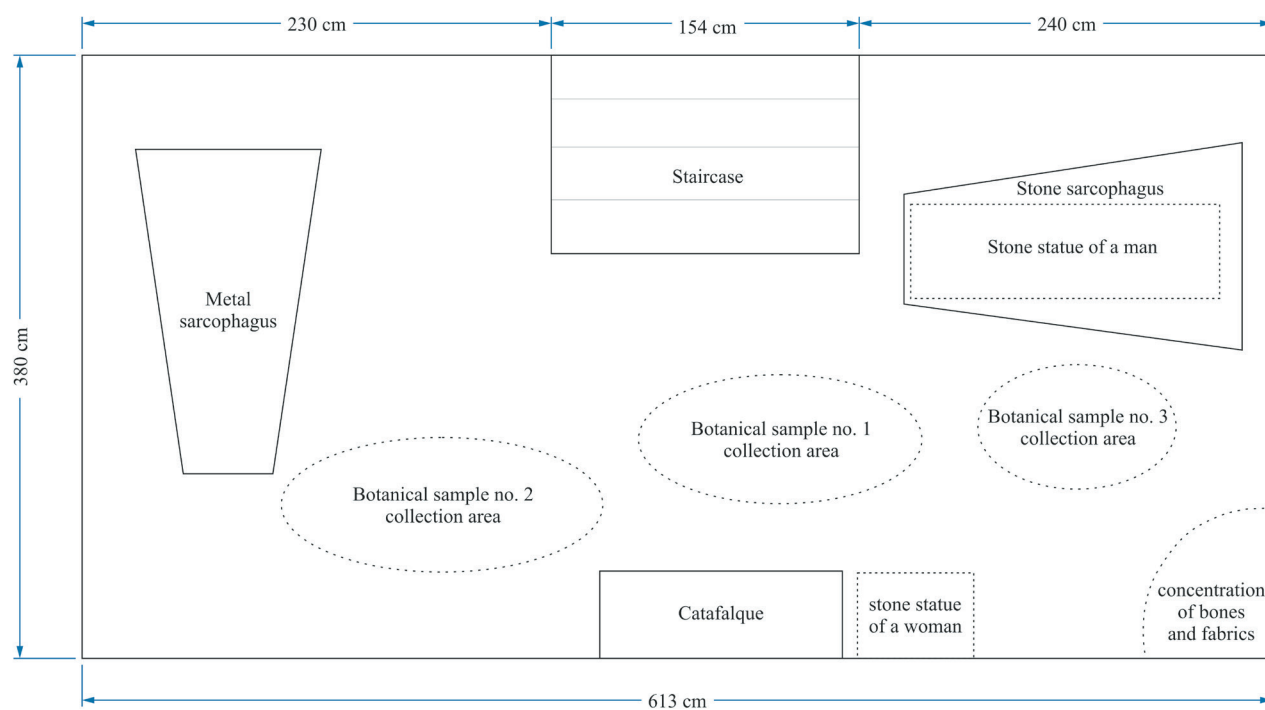


Fig. 2. Plan of the crypt indicating the main elements in its space (photo by J. Michalik).



tion over centuries leads to the slow decomposition of the fibers and sometimes even to destruction (Garside and Wyeth 2006, 75–76; Grupa *et al.* 2015, 42).

Even though each fabric retained its moisture content, the wetting process in the lab was still prolonged, as they were loaded with various contaminants: sticky sand particles, plant fragments, wooden shavings, or corrosion products from metal objects. For example, rust stains are residues from iron objects, and green ones from the products of copper alloy objects (Grupa 2013, 135). Removing these impurities was primarily aimed at reducing the weight weighing down the fabric fibers. During the cleaning process, it was noticed that the lower parts of the cloths were much more weakened, and the most significant losses were registered in these parts. After an extensive rinsing of surfactants used to soften the layers of dirt and make the fibers more flexible, disinfection proceeded. Fabrics soaked in the biocide remained for a week in thick plastic bags. After this time, they were impregnated using a composition of polyethylene glycol 400 (PEG 400), Paraloid B-72 in ethanol, and toluene in proportions of 1/1. The impregnation process was stabilized in a vacuum chamber at a temperature of  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  (freeze-drying). Since the textile material was highly fragmented, it was only during their restoration that they could be separated and matched to individual types (Grupa 2007, 213–215).

### The child's funeral dress and its reconstruction

Only one of the dresses was entirely preserved (Fig. 3, 4). It was a child's dress, in which the deceased newborn was most likely dressed. Therefore, it was possible to proceed with fabric duplication and reconstruction immediately after the stabilization of the impregnation process. In the next step, an examination under the microscope was carried out. The surfaces of the fabrics are observed from different angles of light, which sometimes allows a colored glow to be observed on the object. The dress was sewn from silk fabric in a 1/1 linen weave, which was originally red. After the decomposition of the dye, most of its surface was light beige. The front of the dress was decorated along its entire length with bows made of ribbon 2.5 cm wide. Currently, the ribbon is green, but it was probably originally blue (the decomposition of the blue dye was traced during the conservation and reconstruction of the żupan of Michał Szczuka buried in the crypt under the chancel of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn (Grupa *et al.* 2014, 69; Nowosad *et*



Fig. 3. A child's grave robe decorated with pasamons immediately after excavation (photo by J. Gawroński).



Fig. 4. One of the ribbons from a child's gown (photo by K. Jasiak).

*al.* 2021b, 124–129). The robe was of straightforward construction. It was sewn together from 3 fragments 115 cm in length each, (27, 27.7, and 75 cm in width) with a straight stitch – a fastener. Then one of the longer edges was wrinkled and thus formed the dress's neckline, trimmed with piping of the same fabric. The design of the sleeves differed significantly from the

classic ones because the holes in the base fabric were cut, and two rectangles were attached with a fastener.

Before preserving the fabric of the children's dress, each element was stripped and marked with colored thread (each seam with a different color). This way of marking the details allows for easily matching the dress pieces after conservation. The fabric was then cleaned, followed by all the steps described above. Since there was no problem reproducing the gown's shape, it was decided to reconstruct it fully. First of all, all fragments of the fabric were ironed out. A mixture of Akrykleber glues (498 and 360 in a ratio of 1 to 1) was applied to the silicon paper. Then, each dress piece was placed on the glue layer and glued to the fabric – ironed through a wet cloth. The most challenging part of this reconstruction is lifting the fabric with glue and applying it to the doublage fabric. In order to prepare

the doublage fabric, it is necessary to know all the dimensions and prepare the appropriate size of the dress blanks because every wrong move causes the fabric to be glued together. This procedure is often combined with the removal of glue and repeating all the steps once again. In all steps, it is essential to remember that archaeological fabrics are so weakened that it is not always possible to repeat these actions. Once the fabric has been applied to the doublage, reconstruction can begin (Fig. 5: a, b). Since the edges of the fabrics to be stitched together have been previously marked with colored threads, merging them should not pose any problems. In addition to physically marking the seams with colored threads, descriptions of these actions and photographs are also taken, as not all additional details are always preserved during restoration procedures.



Fig. 5. Children's dress after reconstruction; a – front, b – back (photo by D. Grupa).



Usually, all elements are stitched with the stitches initially determined during the analysis of the details. Such a stitching technique is not always reproducible since this element is often obscure. These were stitches “behind the needle” in the children's dress, so all the elements were joined similarly. Only the sleeves were fixed with a straight stitch – a fastline. Originally, double-threaded silk thread (ss/Z) was used, while synthetic thread from Amanda was used in the reconstruction.

### Children's grave gowns in the form of an apron, and comparative analyzes

As previously mentioned, the children's grave robe rescued from the sarcophagus was of a simple construction, without any elements that might indicate the time of its manufacture. In this situation, only the relics found in the furnishings, elements of the coffins, or at least the iconography on the sarcophagus offer the possibility of approximate burial dating. It appears to have occurred between the 1720 burial of Adam von Kottwitz (Fig. 6) and the burial of another representative of the family around 1770. The most important find inside the sarcophagus was the discovery of medallions that were missing on the outside of the sarcophagus. On one of them we find the date 1720, and on another, much larger one, there is an inscription concerning the death and foundation of a marble epitaph in the church by Adam von Kottwitz, who died in 1720. Before the insertion of the stone sarcophagus in 1770 (the last burial in the crypt), the floor of the crypt was cleaned up from earlier burials contained in wooden coffins (hence the ossuary in the metal sarcophagus). An analysis of the crypt situation suggests that the burial in the stone sarcophagus was the last. However, the caveat should be made that a full analysis of the sarcophagus has not yet been completed, and these findings are subject to change.

Such simple long gowns have been found before in children's graves and elsewhere. The earliest dated are the dresses found in the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Toruń of the Majerman sisters – Ania died in 1619, Zuzanna died in 1623 (Grupa 2005, 54–55). The first of them was buried in a gown made of silk cloth in 1/1 linen weave. The only decoration recorded was a rectangular collar decorated around three edges with laid embroidery made with gold-colored metal thread (Grupa 2005, 148). With Ania's gown, it was first discovered that it was only the front with sleeves. The back of the gown was missing, but it had not been there from the



Fig. 6. Medallion from the sarcophagus with an inscription dedicated to Adam von Kottwitz, who died in 1720 (photo by J. Gawroński).

very beginning, as it was constructed like an apron. Information about such a practice has not been found before in written sources. Of course, we do not always know how the elements of dresses were merged together (“behind the needle”, fastening, or pinning) and whether the back of a particular dress can be identified. Zuzanna's dress was sewn from fabric with a geometric-plant pattern obtained by altering the weave. It used long weft interlacing of several and a dozen threads (Grupa 2005, 149). Discovered in a crypt in Bytom Odrzański, at least 170 years later, two children's gowns of the Schönaich family were of the same construction. The front was arranged in folds decorated with bows pinned in the middle and the sleeves pinned. The gowns were much longer than the bodies of the deceased infants and were folded under the feet (Grupa 2011, 35, 43). As the gowns were found on the remains, it was possible to confirm previous information about the much longer children's gowns than the deceased child's height. This was the case with the gowns from Konotop, where the height of the deceased child was about 50 cm, and the length of the dress was 115 cm, also this may be the answer to the damage to the lower garments.

Similar information was provided by the burials in Szczuczyn, where clothing (shirts and gowns) was found reaching both the ankles and flowing freely beyond the feet (Grupa *et al.* 2014, 60–75). The custom

of putting longer gowns on the bodies of deceased children was also practiced in other countries. An example of this is an epitaph from the Protestant St. Nicholas Church in Køge, Denmark, depicting a pastor's family praying for two deceased children (Johannsen 1988, 39; Grupa *et al.* 2015, 163). The children are dressed in long, wide, white gowns wrapped under their feet. An additional feature is the tight-fitting white headpieces adorned with threadbare white lace, just like their gowns.

Grave robes with an apron design can be found at a number of archaeological sites, including Gdańsk (Drażkowska 2012, 178–180), Gniew (Grupa *et al.* 2015, 99–100), Kostrzyn nad Odrą (Drażkowska 2007, 221), Lublin, Tworków (Drażkowska 2007, 216) or Roskilde, Denmark (Johannsen 1988, 48–49). Despite the simple workmanship of these gowns, they are still among the richest child burials due to the silk used. Dresses made in this way lost nothing of their grandeur. Efforts were made to decorate them according to the latest fashion trends (Grupa 2005, 55). Perhaps in such situations, one can realize how valuable silk was among the textile raw materials.

It is quite problematic to only describe children's grave costumes through the prism of silk dresses derived from archaeological research. It is a small slice of the history of this type of clothing, albeit demonstrating the wealth and prestige of a particular family. Only research in the Szczuczyn crypts has provided the opportunity to describe the full grave clothing (Grupa 2012a, 111–122; Grupa *et al.* 2013, 99–106; 2014; Dudziński *et al.* 2015; 2017). On the mummified remains were preserved not only silk but also linen, cotton, and wool clothing items of both adults and children (Kozłowski and Krajewska 2013, 91–97).

An analysis of children's burials from Szczuczyn (N=26) shows that only 14% of outerwear was made of silk. The other part were linen dresses decorated mostly with silk ribbons, block lace, and gauze. Only 9% of the garments were worn by children during their lifetime (Grupa *et al.* 2014, 77). However, the most significant information gleaned during the study concerned the undergarments, i.e. underwear. Until now, it had only been guessed that linen shirts were put under silk gowns, which decompose at a rapid rate in the graves. The material from Szczuczyn confirmed this, as it is difficult to assume that a child laid to rest in March was only dressed in a gown of transparent gauze (Grupa 2012b, 181–185). The most critical piece of information concerning the undergarments, however, was that there were two instead of one linen undershirt. The one clinging to the

body was usually made of more delicate, thin fabric, the top one of a thicker one. Even if the deceased was dressed in a "czecheł", there were still two shirts underneath. "Checheł" were linen shirts (otherwise known as "funeral shirts") that church and state administrations recommended as grave shirts (Kuchowicz 1975, 204; Grupa 2005, 30). In addition to burial shirts, a linen shroud was also recommended (Binski 2001, 81). However, linen shrouds were not found at the described site. On the other hand, silk shrouds have been preserved from studies in Bremen and Gdańsk (Petrascheck-Heim 1977, 108; Kizik 1998, 85; Grupa 2017, 205–206).

After performing a comparative analyzes, we can assume that it is possible to describe the clothing of the newborn from Konotop. As we know from the earlier description, the upper gown was made of plain silk fabric. We can only guess at the rest of the clothing and think that the newborn was dressed in two more linen shirts which have decomposed. Since woolen stockings were found in Szczuczyn and Bytom Odrzański, we can assume with a high degree of probability that the child from Konotop also had them, but it has decomposed. The same must have happened to the linen cap. Loose bows very similar to those of the gown were found in the sarcophagus, so it can be assumed that the cap may have been decorated with them.

### Children's grave robes in iconography

The most significant number of depictions of children can be found on tombstones, various types of epitaph paintings, and gravestones. All images are usually similar, differing only in the material they were made (stone, canvas). When analyzing them, they should be approached with a considerable degree of caution, as they depict, for example, children dressed in period clothing rather than grave clothes. A similar phenomenon has been reported for the clothing of adults, both lay people (Nowosad *et al.* 2021a, 64–69, 77–79) and clergy (Grupa 1998, 287–291). Already in previous eras, and even in antiquity, children were depicted in miniaturized adult clothing, and this was also the case in the Baroque period (Johannsen 1988, 39; Grupa 2005, 60, 84; Stankiewicz 2015, 88; Nowosad *et al.* 2021b, 131, 142). If we wanted to rely only on the rationale of the iconography, then the infant from Konotop should have been dressed in wrappers. This, however, was not the case, and the child was dressed in a grave robe, in which children from the first year of life were usually dressed. Also,



examples of grave dress from Roskilde, Toruń, and Bytom Odrzański confirm observations about dressing infants and even newborns not only in wrappers but also in grave cloths (Johannsen 1988, 48–49; Grupa 2005, 53–55; Grupa 2016, 175–180).

The confrontation of these sources should keep researchers from making definitive and unambiguous conclusions.

Despite some inaccuracies, the base of iconographic sources is an indispensable complement to the costume analyses performed by archaeologists specializing in conserving and reconstructing grave clothing. The legible details in the iconography make this work possible for them. In the case of the Konotop gown, there was no need to search for such details, as it was entirely preserved. The arrangement of the wrinkles and the ornamentation in the form of bows could be confirmed in very similar representa-

tions from children's grave slabs found in Silesia and elsewhere (Stankiewicz 2015, children's grave slabs 1, 77, 82, 83, 150, 157, 158; 2021, fig. 34, 59, 65, 66, 90, 92, 100, 122).

## Conclusion

With the knowledge already gained about child burials, it can be surmised with a high degree of probability that the child from Konotop was buried in a similar manner to other children from noble families. However, depositing them secondarily in the sarcophagus disrupted the orderly arrangement and only previously acquired information on the grave clothes allowed them to be put in order. There were at least three such cases (according to our knowledge), as the fabrics extracted from the sarcophagus indicate similar burials in the described crypt. It seems that the



**Fig. 7.** Attempt to reconstruct the castrum doloris of Maria Anna Szczuka (d. 1705) on the basis of written sources and archaeological research (photo by M. Nowak).

burial ceremonies of the buried children followed the established pattern in force in the Baroque *Pompa funebris*. Based on written and archaeological sources, it was possible to reconstruct the *castrum doloris* of Maria Anna Szczuka (d. 1705). It would not be overstepping the mark for this vision to be transferred to the burial of a child in a silk dress from Konotop (Fig. 7).

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