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True or False – Difficulties in Interpreting the Funeral Dress from the Burial of the “Bride” in the Szczuczyn Crypt, Poland

Abstract

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Funeral costumes are elements of funerary furnishings with very different characteristics. Their form has not only been influenced by local funeral customs but also by the property status of the families of the deceased and the fashion trends prevailing in a given region. The study of funerary clothing clearly translates into the general development of knowledge about the evolution of fashion, and thus the issue is no longer only the domain of costume specialists, but also archaeology. This is clearly discernible on the example of the results of archaeological research conducted in the crypts of the Church of St. Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary – over 100 burials turned out to be hiding the largest archaeological collection of modern funerary clothing from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Against the background of these costumes, the clothes in which the woman placed in burial no. 8 (EA crypt) stands out. Her attire took an exceptionally impressive form, as evidenced by the fact that this tomb aroused the interest of the local population long before archaeologists arrived in Szczuczyn. According to the stories of the locals, she was buried in a wedding dress. As a result of the verification carried out both on the stand and as a result of laboratory analyses, it was determined whether this theory can be confirmed with the use of scientific methods. The analyses, apart from referring to the theory of stories told by local history enthusiasts, turned out to contribute a lot to the current state of knowledge on the development of 18th-century women's fashion.

Keywords: women's clothing, textiles, crypts, Szczuczyn, Poland

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Introduction

Archaeology also contributed to the state of knowledge on the history of women's clothing both in Europe and the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The exploration of crypts located in churches throughout Poland allowed for the verification of theoretical assumptions and the determination of what Polish noblewomen actually wore in the modern period. Textile material obtained as a result of conducting archaeological research in churches in the territory of the Republic of Poland is still a relatively small collection, but one which is gradually growing. We have the oldest information on grave clothing thanks to research carried out in 1946 at the castle in Szczecin, albeit modest

because it is in a very bad state of preservation. In 1977, during the works carried out in the Słupsk church of St. Jacek, a rich collection of fabrics was obtained from the tombs of Ernest and Anna de Croy. The clothes were secured, and the results of the reconstruction works and analyses were presented in the article *Conservation of garments from the sarcophagi of the Słupsk princes* (Rawa-Szubert *et al.* 1981). The next grave dresses which were subjected to detailed analyses come from the crypt of the church of St. Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Toruń, published by Małgorzata Grupa (2005, 62–66, 80–81, 164–176) and then Anna Drażkowska (2008, 15–16). Since then, however, a number of discoveries have been made that broaden the knowledge of women's grave clothing. Their group includes material

from the following sites: Lublin, Dubno (Drażkowska and Grupa 2002; Drażkowska 2006; Drażkowska *et al.* 2015), and Szczuczyn, Gniew, Strzelno, Przemyśl, Białowęż, Biała Rawska, Końskowola, Przeczno, Przeworsk, Konotop, Radzyń Podlaski, Kraków (Badzińska and Schild 2007; Drażkowska 2008, 15; 2020; Grupa 2012a, 110–112; Grupa *et al.* 2013, 102–104, fig. 5–9; Majorek 2014; Sulkowska-Tuszyńska and Wielocha 2019, 318–327; Nowosad *et al.* 2021, 64–73, 120–126). The research in Szczuczyn provided the largest number of women's dresses. In twelve women's burials, material was discovered which amounts to almost 45% of the total collection of archaeological evidence of women's fashion in Poland.

Research into the crypts of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Szczuczyn

The existence of crypts under the floor of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn (Fig. 1) were not a secret for the local community – the unblocked entrance to the basement under the presbytery meant that many inhabitants visited them long before the arrival of archaeologists. Due to this fact, even before the first recognition of the crypts, it was possible to determine that it was an exceptional place – the remains of a significant number of the dead were

naturally mummified, and the grave dress still adorned their bodies (Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 14; Kozłowski and Krajewska 2013). Local activists wanting to learn about the history of the region saw the need to conduct a fully methodical inventory, and document and analyse the historic material deposited in the church's crypts. Thanks to the initiative of Tomasz Dudziński, with the support of the city and the parish, a group of archaeologists associated with the Toruń NCU began research in 2011 in the basement of the chancel. The works, which with time took the form of multi-season research, are managed by Małgorzata Grupa. The first inventory of the crypt space showed that it would be necessary to carry out systematic archaeological works – a number of burials were covered with a layer of sand deposited over the centuries (Michalik 2020). Also present was a considerable amount of refuse left by outsiders (Grupa 2019). A significant number of coffins and bodies had been translocated and this meant that one coffin often contained many mummified remains, as well as loose bones (Fig. 2; Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 14; 2015; 2017; Grupa *et al.* 2014).

As a result of this work, it was found that Szczuczyn is a unique site on the archaeological map of Poland – the microclimate prevailing for decades resulted in the preserved fabrics in over eighty burials (not only silk but also clothing made of linen, wool, and cotton fabrics), which provides a fresh opportunity



Fig. 1. Location of Szczuczyn on the map of Poland (compiled by J. Michalik).

to learn about the history of fashion in Poland in the modern period (Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 16–18; Dobek 2021, 303–304). The multi-season archaeological work has been carried out intermittently since 2011.

Based on the archaeological research conducted in the crypts (Fig. 3) of the Blessed Virgin Mary church, we were able to distinguish four groups of burials from over a hundred inventoried graves: burials of children, clergy, men, and women (Grupa 2012a, 110–123; Dobek 2021, 305–311). The latter constitute a relatively small percentage of the total number of people buried there – this group includes thirteen graves: seven of them were originally located in the western crypt, while the rest were discovered in the eastern crypt. Ten of these burials were not mixed up, which significantly influenced the completeness of the funerary furnishings, both in terms of costumes and devotional items. It is worth noting that during the archaeological research, elements of women’s clothing trampled into the threshing floor were also discovered. However, it is impossible to assign the found elements (e.g. caps, grave dress) to the remains of a person placed in a specific coffin, and

it seems too bold to put forward the thesis that this garment was surely originally part of one of the three displaced burials. It is worth noting that the identities of two women buried in the crypts in Szczuczyn, Regina Karwowska and Teresa Umińska, are identified by name and surname. The top of the first coffin is decorated with a metal cartouche, while on the side of Umińska’s coffin her name and surname were placed. Karwowska’s coffin is also the youngest burial, among those whose dating could be determined (either on the basis of data from the coffin or thanks to the information contained in parish books) – buried on January 25, 1830. The dress found in the burial of Teresa Umińska is the first gown which has been fully reconstructed and displayed at the museum exhibition in the monastery (Grupa 2012a). Despite its simple form, it has elements that can be considered characteristic of 18th-century women’s costumes, including numerous folds and ruffles (Fig. 4). In terms of the state of preservation and the form of the dress, a very interesting example is the burial outfit found in burial no. 2 (WB crypt) – an anonymous woman placed in a simple coffin was dressed in an unornamented dress



Fig. 2. Western crypt – view from the vestibule (part B) towards the catafalque (part A) (photo by M. Majorek).

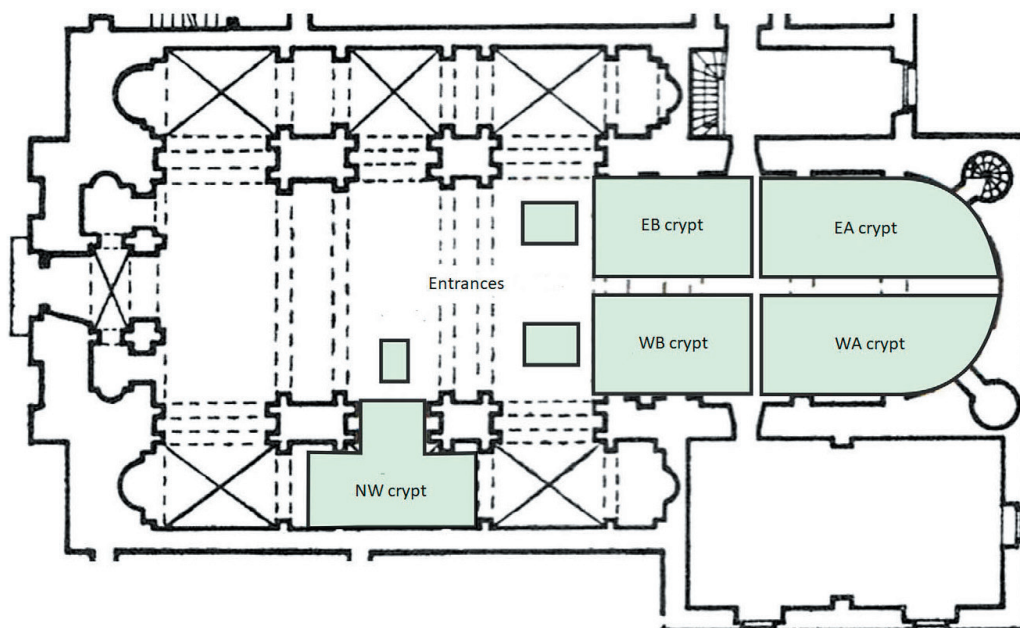


Fig. 3. Plan of the church of the Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn with marked crypts (compiled by T. Dudziński).



Fig. 4. Szczuczyn, western crypt, part A. Burial no. 8 – *in situ* (photo by M. Majorek).

made of green taffeta, with the cut *a la déshabillé*. The dresses were complemented by a number of clothing accessories – mesh gloves, a silk cap, and a scarf with a printed floral and geometric pattern (Grupa 2012a; Przymorska-Sztuczka 2013, 215; Dobek 2022, 36–37). As of today, the historical material related to the burials of women from Szczuczyn has not been published in a monographic form, but now, on the basis of field documentation and laboratory analyses, it is possible to define the collection in Szczuczyn as exceptionally diverse and contributing considerably to the cross-sectional knowledge of women's fashion functioning in the territory of the Republic of Poland in the 18th and 19th centuries. Bobbin laces, of which the largest number were recorded in Szczuczyn, are largely from women's graves. Additionally, a very reliable and valuable collection from a scientific point of view consists of the caps with which women placed in seven coffins were equipped (one cap was found in the layers of the threshing floor) (Przymorska-Sztuczka and Majorek 2013, 33–34).

Burial of the “Bride” (western crypt, part A, no. 8)

Of all the coffins where the remains of women were placed in the Blessed Virgin Mary church, one in particular is distinguished by its funerary equipment: burial no. 8 together with the older woman bur-

ied in it (over 50 years old – analysis made by Tomasz Kozłowski). What makes it unique from the others is the surprising richness of the diversity of the historic material, as well as the completeness of the funerary dress of the deceased. For many years there have been stories among the local population about the “Bride” buried in the basement, whose body is dressed in a wedding dress. The described burial was located in the main part (A) of the western crypt, near the catafalque erected for the Szczuka family (Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 15). Despite the fact that the coffin lid was pulled back, it should be stated that it did not adversely affect the quantitative condition of the sites and their destruction – the burial was not plundered. This is also true in the case of the remaining burials in Szczuczyn. While no jewellery and ornaments were found there, their absence in the grave equipment is a phenomenon typical of burials from crypts studied in the territory of present-day Poland – including the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Dobek 2022, 46). The buried woman is still an anonymous person – we have no source data on the basis of which we could identify her personal data. The deceased was placed in the grave in an outfit consisting of the following elements: a dress, textile shoes, stockings, gloves, a shirt, and a cap (Dobek 2022, 46). The light beige colour of the clothes, the headgear reminiscent of a wedding veil thanks to the use of gauze as the top decoration, and her thick, black hair actually stimulated the imagination of the local population. However, labelling the deceased as the “Bride” is not necessarily correct, and certainly the confirmation that she was buried in a wedding dress is currently unrealistic from a scientific point of view. Being guided by this type of traditional oral communication may lead to a number of interpretative errors, and thus act to the detriment of the conducted research. It is a fact, however, that the equipment of burial no. 8 attracted attention with its exceptionally rich form long before the start of research in the crypts in Szczuczyn, and in 2011 it also surprised the archaeologists from Toruń (Grupa *et al.* 2013, 102–103).

Dress

Funeral dress no. 8 is 124 cm long. It was made of light silk, perhaps in a natural white colour. The background of the fabric was made in a plain weave 1/1 and non-twist threads were used for this. Its entire surface is divided by blue-brown red stripes that divide it into segments. Between the stripes, there is a repeating and alternating plant motif. Its form is

reminiscent of small bunches of multi-coloured motifs on twigs surrounded by greenish leaves. They were made with the brooch technique and arranged every 40 cm. Different colours of threads were used to shape the flowers, although they were all similar in tone: lilac pink, lilac, ecru, also as contrast, green was used in the creation of the leaves. Vertical stripes were made by introducing warp threads. Each of the stripes formed a system of threads in the warp: two threads in the background colour – break – brown thread – six blue threads – brown thread – break – four threads in the background colour – brown thread – six blue threads – thread brown – break – two threads in the background colour. The dress was lined with a snow-white, silk lining (Dobek 2022, 47–48).

Both the skirt and the outer dress with the bodice cut off were made of the same fabric described above. The sleeves were long, narrow, and measured 48 cm. Below the wrist, there were cuffs fastened with sewing pins and decorated with wide bobbin lace. The vertical edges of the dress are trimmed with a decorative pleat made of the same fabric, widening downwards. On top of each pleat, two bobbin laces of different widths were sewn – the same decorative elements also trimmed the neckline of the dress. It is deep and square, reaching 23 cm from the shoulders. It is also decorated with the lower edge of the skirt to which the dome is sewn, a strongly wrinkled wave, and a narrower spool (Fig. 5).

Shirt, stockings

Under the dress of the deceased was a knee-length linen shirt. It was made of linen fabric with a plain weave 1/1. For this reason, its circumference was not known for certain, as it was impossible to lift its edge and straighten the folded surface. It was certainly very wrinkled around the neckline, which could be described as roughly 2.5 to 3 meters in width of the fabric used. From the knee height, the underwear function was performed by stockings made of white, silk yarn (in fact, they reached above the knees). They were decorated from the ankles upwards with an ornament located on the sides of the inner part of the leg covering. The embroidery applied to their surface was made with the same material as the stockings, without twisting thread. The openwork is a system of rhombuses arranged in a geometric-plant motif, increasing by a given, regular number of eyelets (from the ankle to the middle of the calf), thanks to which a conical shape was obtained. The stockings were knitted with the foot being made, which allowed for the formation of the heel. It is likely that



Fig. 5. Szczuczyn, western crypt, part B. Burial 8 – funerary dress during conservation (photo by M. Dobek).

they were machine-made from very good yarn, which translates into the high quality of the product (Grupa *et al.* 2013, 102; Dobek 2022, 49).

Other elements of the outfit

The funeral outfit was supplemented with gloves, a cap, and shoes. The gloves were made of thin, delicate leather, which made them match the colours of the dress perfectly (Fig. 6). They were 19 cm long, reaching more or less to the middle of the forearm (from the tips of the fingers towards the elbow joint), which means that they can be classified as semi-long (Przymorska-Sztuczka 2013, 215).

The cap was made of a blue silk fabric (taffeta), decorated with two bows. The first was tied to a piece of beige silk formed into a Gauze weave. The other one is made of ecru silk pasamon in a satin weave, which gives the effect of a smooth, shiny surface. The edges of the ribbon are finished with insets. An additional warp of gold-coloured metal threads was introduced along the edges. As a result of oxidation, the surface of the braid of the metal thread became silvery with time (due to the high silver content in the alloy). The bows were shaped by attaching a large number of brass pins and pins to the front of the cap. One of the unique finds is the discovery of the cap's insulation with cotton wool, which was sewn to its inner surface with a much lighter silk thread made in the zz/S twist (Dudziński *et al.* 2013, 103; Przymorska-Sztuczka and Majorek 2013, 34; Dobek 2022, 52–53).

Some elements of the footwear are made of the same leather material as the gloves. They were textile slippers with a wooden heel and covered with white leather. The red silk vamp was lined with the same material. The sole and the top of the heel are made of thick brown leather. Textile shoes had a cut characteristic of mulet shoes – almond-shaped, strongly bent toe, low top, light form, and a wooden heel (Kulesz 2019).

A look through the prism of contrast – burial dress no. 8 against the background of a similarly dated outfit by Teresa Umińska

The cut of the dress with an additional skirt and a cut-off bodice (supplemented with a *bavette* at the front) indicates the *à la française* dresses that dominated European salons in the 18th century. These dresses were decorated with various accessories: needle and bobbin laces, ribbons, artificial flowers or heavily wrinkled pleats or ruffles (Możdżyńska-Nawotka 2002, 156–157; Grupa 2005, 62; 2016; Boucher 2012, 264–266; Nowosad and Grupa 2020, 251–252). The dress described above with all the accessories was made according to the prevailing fashion patterns. Meticulousness in the selection of accessories and the high quality of workmanship created a perfect image of an eighteenth-century lady. None of the tiniest elements in the tomb furnishings was accidental. At about the same time, Teresa Umińska, whose dress was cut in accordance with the prevailing fashion, was



Fig. 6. Szczuczyn, western crypt, part B. Leather gloves from burial no. 8 – *in situ* (photo by D. Grupa).



Fig. 7. Szczuczyn, eastern crypt, part A. Reconstructed tomb dress of Teresa Umińska (photo by A. Zamorowska).

buried in the neighbouring crypt. Despite the use of plain silk (currently dark brown in colour), the dress gave the impression of being sad and poor in relation to the above-mentioned (Fig. 7). The bodice was tightly fitted, lined with a lining made of three types of linen fabric and one cotton fabric. The sleeves were narrow, reaching to the elbow and also on the lining. The lower part of the dress from the waist down was arranged in centimetre pleats. The edge of the dress is decorated with a frill made of the same fabric (Grupa 2012a, 110–111). Both dresses are sewn in the same style, and there is a gap in the selection and finishing of details. In the first case, a festival of various top-class accessories, in the second case, there are no decorations, apart from a frill. One gets the impression that the owner of the brown dress was a working woman (this is confirmed by her biography as a secular sister of the Beguinage Order). On the other hand, the one with a light dress with lace was presumably a regular at salons, a woman that had been watched and admired.

At the present stage of research, it is the most representative example of a grave dress. It seems that the children's dresses from St. Jana in Gdańsk, made of various types of gauze, are an immoderate demonstration of wealth (Drażkowska 2012, 173, 175; Grupa 2012b, 182–184). However, the dress of the so-called Bride tops the list of 18th-century funerary costumes and more.

The uniqueness of the described outfit lies in its uncommon nature and complexity – there is no other dress in Polish archaeological collections that combines so many different forms of decoration, including

a combination of embroidered floral motif with a large number of lace elements. Such a unique appearance of the dress makes it impossible to assign to it any analogies from archaeological research and Polish museum collections.

The refinement of every detail of the outfit is noticeable in the portraits of representative women from that period, which undoubtedly indicated their belonging to a social elite. Regardless of whether it was the image of a French court lady or a Gdańsk patrician, luxury was present in every element (Birecki 2020, 179–181; Nowosad and Grupa 2020, 241–258).

Summary

The funeral dress found in the crypt, and in particular the dress from burial no. 8, can be considered to be garments typical of 18th-century fashion. However, the number of accessories and lace ornaments makes the entire dress exceptionally rich, despite the traditional cut for women's costumes of that time (Możdżyńska-Nawotka 2002, 156–157; Boucher 2012, 264–266). The numerous folds and decorations, and above all the light colour, bring to mind the idea of a wedding dress. However, costume analyses do not distinguish between such dresses. To distinguish them, it would be necessary to rely on written sources, but in these, however, such costumes are not mentioned. Therefore, all inquiries about the “Bride” outfit remain the stories of the local society and are not supported by scientific research. The research on burial no. 8 may provoke reflection on how much we perceive objects from the distant past through the prism of everyday life and customs prevailing in the modern world. Is assigning a buried woman a wedding dress in grave furnishings just because it stands out from the others with the colour and quantity of lace, a rational and objective inference? Definitely not. In a world where communities are hungry for sensational information, and each headline becomes a coloured version of the truth, it is very easy to fall into the enrichment of one's own interpretations with information that carries emotional baggage. This also applies to scientific works, which by presenting unusual – from the layman's point of view – discoveries can reach a wider audience and even the mainstream. However, the role of an archaeologist is primarily to recreate the past, to combine facts, and these do not allow speculations in any way, even at the cost of refuting the “truths” previously presented and established in local accounts. It is clearly visible in the above-mentioned example of an 18th-century burial dress from the crypts in Szczuczyn.

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