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PLANTS IN FUNERAL CEREMONIES IN POLAND AND EUROPE NORTH OF THE ALPS (13th-18th CENTURIES)

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INTRODUCTION

In the funeral ceremonies of the Middle Ages and modern era, plants were used in the form of cut flowers, bouquets, twigs, wreaths, maiden crowns, pillow fillings, coffin mattresses or grave pit linings and other types of decorations made from natural and artificial components. Fruit and sprigs of herbs were considered a gift for the deceased, an attribute of those who attended the ceremony, which was put into the coffin after it finished. Twigs were used to decorate not only the body, but also the home where the wake was held. Plants placed in burials were meant to have practical functions: to decorate, provide fragrance, preserve, desiccate, absorb the products of decomposition, facilitate the positioning of the body, repel pests, provide peace and quiet, protect the deceased and the living from evil and to carry a moralising message to the mourners. Dry organic matter served as filling for the bottoms of coffins, pillows, mattresses and even coffin quilts. Herbs were used to preserve corpses through the process of embalming. They were applied to the bodies and to the garments in which the dead were laid to rest. Wild and cultivated plants, including edible cereals and fruit, were also placed in the coffins. Plant motifs can be found on decoration of coffins or grave furnishings and other artefacts associated with the funeral process. Plants and plant motifs used in modern funerary ceremonies can be associated with both medical knowledge, magical beliefs and symbolic meanings.

The aim of this study is to interpret plant remains contextually related to burials dating from around the early 13th- late 18th century. Their role and significance in the funerary ceremony at this time in Europe north of the Alps will be presented. A considerable part of the text is focused on the customs of Central Europe, especially the lands of Poland, where during the analysed period original elements of the setting of burials developed, but also the practices of Christian burial formed in other parts of Europe were assimilated. The lands of Europe north of the Alps were chosen as a reference because of close climatic and vegetation characteristics, a similar time of reception of the European intellectual legacy associated with botanical knowledge and increased development of plant cultivation techniques.

The beginning of the chronological frame chosen can be defined as a period of stabilisation of the Christian funerary liturgy and funerary symbolism, including plant motifs. The study mainly focuses on burials dating from the High Middle Ages to the end of the modern period which is characterised by the greatest variety and extent of funerary practices associated with plants. The study refers to phenomena preceding the chronological span, and to the followings developed on the basis of modern funerary customs. The analysis includes artefacts from archaeological research and exploration of burial sites located in Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands,

Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, France, Great Britain, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. In addition to archaeological finds, iconographical representations showing the deceased before burial surrounded by funerary plants were included as source materials for the study.

The analysis involved tracing the variants and uses of botanical specimens or artefacts made from plants (categorised as flower, sprig, bouquet, wreath/grave crown, grave/coffin lining or cushion filling) in burials and identifying their function. The topic of embalming is excluded from the study, although the findings from the examination of the bodies of the deceased subjected to these processes are listed in the catalogue. The origins of corpse conservation practices are probably to be traced to Southern Europe, from where comes a considerable number of archaeological finds and historical written records. Thus, more reasonably, the embalming should be covered in a wider context than Europe north of the Alps. Attempts to characterise the function of plants in burials are based on contemporary natural experiments, ethnobotanical data (also in historical terms on the basis of herbaria, iconography, written sources), and information about plant symbolism in the past, assuming its considerable universality for Europe north of the Alps.

Among the main research questions were the continuity of the use of plants in funerary ceremonies between the Middle Ages and the modern period, and to a minor extent: between Antiquity and the Middle Ages and between the early modern and the modernity periods. A further focus was to demonstrate the possible evolution of customs involving the use of plants in ceremonies that occurred in parallel with the transformation of the funerary ceremony, and to identify trends or key factors that modified the development of these customs. Species of plants important in funeral ceremonies across the study area are distinguished, along with general trends influencing the selection of plants suitable for coffins. The study also addresses the origins of the customs or the manners of the plant use itself in ceremonies in the past, the patterns and directions of their spread. The basis of the research method adopted in this study is the necessity of combining the apparatus inherent in archaeology with that used in other disciplines and specialities.

The main type of sources employed in this study are identified and described plant remains and traces of the presence of plants from burials understood as places of intentional burial of the dead in the past. These plants are associated with the funerary ritual practised by representatives of Christian, medieval and modern European societies north of the Alps, from the 13th to the mid-19th century. The terms ritual, rite and ceremony are often used interchangeably, as the definitions of these terms remain difficult to establish conclusively. Ceremony is considered to be an act of secular nature in which, unlike in rituals belonging to the realm of religion, a clear worldview is obscured. However, the ceremony contains some elements of liminality, i.e., a state of transition which is one of the phases of a ritual according to Arnold van Gennep's conception (van Gennep 2006: 151, 152). Ceremony, following Raymond Firth, would be defined as a set of formalised behaviours where the significance lies rather in the form itself and the social impact, not necessarily in the expected effectiveness (Firth 1967: 73 cited in Dąsal 2018: 15-22). Rituals are traditionally attributed in anthropology to societies with a magico-religious orientation, whereas ceremonies are characteristic of industrial and post-industrial societies. Ceremony is an intentional activity associated with the perpetuation of social order, concentrated on the external form of action, and containing elements of social theatre.

In the fossil materials, only part of the information on the species structure of the ancient flora is preserved. Plant fragments are not always preserved in a condition that allows identification to the species level, and often it is not possible to determine from which plant they were extracted. Archaeobotany investigates the accumulations of dead plant fragments revealed at archaeological sites using methods characteristic of botany (Sady 2017: 225-226). The basic procedures for archaeobotanical investigation are the identification of plant remains and the creation of a list of plant species that were occurring on the site in the past (Sady 2017: 219).

Plant remains, discovered using archaeological methods, are preserved in macroscopic or microscopic form. Microscopic forms include: pollen grains, spores (of bryophytes and ferns), phytoliths ('silica formations in plant cells, also silica-saturated plant remains'), diatoms ('clusters of uni-

cellular algae') (Lityńska-Zając and Wasylikowa 2005: 44--45). Macroscopic remains represent seeds, fruit, organs of plants, i.e., leaves, stems, storage organs (rhizomes, tubers and roots), wood or bark (Lityńska-Zając and Wasylikowa 2005: 41). Objects made from organic raw materials are also sometimes classified as archaeobotanical sources (Sady 2017: 219).

Plant remains, like most materials of organic origin, are able to survive in stable conditions in which the decomposition process is slowed down. Not all plant parts are equally likely to survive in archaeological deposits. The most easily decomposed parts are vegetative organs, while fruit, seeds, wood, culms and leaves of grasses are more resistant to decay (Lityńska-Zając and Wasylikowa 2005: 41).

Preservation of plant remains occurs most often in peat (with high humidity, low pH, low air access, if the site is below the groundwater level), by charring (enrichment of the remains with carbon as a result of high temperature with low air access, since charred plants are not subject to decomposition by microorganisms), total desiccation (in very dry climates the lack of moisture prevents the growth of bacteria and fungi), mineralisation (saturation of the tissues with mineral compounds, e.g. phosphates from water, bone or faeces), negative imprint (e.g. in clay) (Lityńska-Zając and Wasylikowa 2005: 41-45).

The last type of sources that provides information about the ancient flora can be defined as entomological. A study of a presumed burial at Øksnes was recently published in which the presence of beetles feeding on plants was recorded, providing indirect evidence for the presence of plants (hay) at this site in the past (Panagiotakopulu *et al.* 2018).

In conclusion, the most favourable conditions for the preservation of plant remains are constant humidity and temperature. The necessary conditions for the preservation of plant remains usually exist in covered objects, such as crypts and spaces under the floors of churches and chapels. It is mostly more difficult for botanical remains to survive in open sites.

The role of plants in culture and the interaction between plants and people is studied by ethnobotanists. Ethnobotany is a speciality sited 'between' botany and ethnology. Within it the research is conducted on herbal medicine, plant diets, psychoactive species, the use of plants in cosmetology, engineering, and other aspects of everyday life.

As defined by Alicja Zemanek: "Ethnobotany is an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between humans and the plant world. These relationships which are very deep and undergo transformations as civilisation develops, extend to various aspects of our existence, from the practical sides of everyday existence to various spheres of spiritual life, such as beliefs and rituals or plant inspirations in art and literature [...]." Ethnobotanical research therefore requires an interdisciplinary approach and the involvement of more than one disciplines, such as botany, ethnology, linguistics, history of science, medicine, agriculture and culture (Zemanek 2000: 201).

This publication refers to various ethnobotanical compendia of traditional botanical knowledge, most notably the works of Adam Paluch (Paluch 1984, 1989) and Adam Fischer's dictionary, which is a compilation of archival botanical information collected from all over Poland (Fischer and Kujawska 2016). Particularly valuable from the point of view of the subject of this study is the authors' holistic approaches to former medicine, which includes therapeutic methods that escape modern rational mindset. The compendia mainly contain information on the use of plants in medicine, but there is also information on their use in veterinary, hygiene, insect and rodent control, customs linked to the realm of beliefs, annual rites and magic.