Förgängligheten och evigheten

Samhällselitens förhållande till döden genom omhändertagandet av de döendes och dödas kroppar i det tidigmoderna Sverige (ca 1500-1800)

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Akademisk avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i arkeologi med inriktning mot allmän arkeologi vid Stockholms universitet som offentligen kommer att försvaras torsdagen den 12 december 2024 kl. 13.00 i hörsal 9, hus D, Södra huset, Universitetsvägen 10D.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the care given by the social elite to their dead – the preparation, dressing and adornment of their bodies and the furnishing of their coffins with plants and textiles – in Sweden in the early modern period. Focusing on these material practices makes it possible to explore changing notions of death and dead bodies from the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century. The social groups under study are the royal family, the nobility and the upper middle class. The main empirical sources are textual and photographic documentation of excavated graves, royal accounts and official documents, and coffin inscriptions and written descriptions of individuals' deathbeds that provide insight into ideas expressed about death and dying.

Previous research has ascribed the Reformation a major impact on changing burial customs in the early modern period. Archaeologists have suggested that since the spiritual condition of the dead could no longer be influenced by the living, greater emotional care was taken in preparing the body. Historians and art historians have considered the impact of the Reformation as a reason for the bereaved social elite to focus entirely on manifestations of power and status at the wake and during the funeral as well as on grave monuments. This thesis argues that previous research made its interpretations on the wrong premises, taking the impact of written normative accounts as given. The analysis carried out here finds that Reformation did not have a direct and decisive impact on the social elite's care of the dead and was probably not behind the more widespread use of coffins and clothes for the dead in mainstream society either. Rather, material expressions of power and status in the context of preparing the dead and their interment must be interpreted within the framework of virtues: the religiously imbued rules of life that – if followed – would lead to eternal life. The importance of displaying virtues before God on the final day of Judgement seems to have been a development in both Protestant and Catholic European countries alike in the 17th century.

By comparing a variety of contemporary discourses known to the social elite with their material practices, this thesis argues that several are relevant to explaining and understanding how the dead were prepared and cared for. The most important discourses were the conceptions of God and his role in creation, the religiously imbued virtues, and the so-called emotional rules of the period: the norms for how people should express emotions in connection with someone's death, scientific and religious conceptions of the state of the dead body, the body's relationship to the soul, and the roles the body and the soul were considered to take in the conception of eternal life. Many practices around body and coffin must also be understood based on the beliefs that the smell and air from a decaying body, miasma, was considered hazardous to health. I also show that the power-legitimizing notion that the regent, by God's will, was endowed with an immortal political body explains why the regent's body was prepared and handled differently from other bodies during most of the period.

Finally, the thesis argues that the founding of cemeteries on the outskirts of cities by the early 19th century, would not have taken place without an ontological shift in the social elite's understanding of death, dead bodies and the resurrection.

Keywords: *death and burial studies, archaeology of death, body and soul, resurrection, embalming, autopsy, barber, surgeon, miasma, reformation, beliefs and attitudes towards death, materiality of death, emotions, history of emotions, archaeology of emotions, emotional rules, emotives, virtues, the king's two bodies, body politic, biological death, royal bodies, nobility, heart burial, burial dress, shroud, thanatology, 16th century, 17th century, 18th century, graves, cemeteries, coffins, medicinal plants, death as sleep, judgment day, revivalist movement, bereaved, survivors, mourning, transience, ephemerality, eternity.*

Stockholm 2024
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-233390

ISBN 978-91-8014-931-0
ISBN 978-91-8014-932-7
ISSN 0349-4128

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