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## Modern Wooden Coffins – A Biography of Things

### Introduction

The term ‘biography of things’ denotes a theoretical approach combining a physical description (e.g. size, shape, colour) with a description of the meaning of things (places), mostly focusing on the multitude, changeability, and diversity of meanings of objects studied in time. The concept consisting in the study of a social life of things leading to the creation of their biography was introduced by Arjun Appadurai (*The Social Life of Things...* 1986) and Igor Kopytoff (2003: 249–274), and it has been cultivated or developed by other researchers (Gosden, Marshall 1999: 169–178; Domańska 2008: 13–21; Kobińska 2008a: 201–215; 2008b: 227–239; Joy 2009: 540–556; Kędzierzawski 2014: 207–230; Kobińska 2015: 48–49). An inspiration for the use of elements of the biographical approach with regard to wooden coffins, along with the previously adopted material approach, was the growing number of archaeological investigations conducted in churches and cemeteries, during which attempts were made to identify the excavated human remains based on broadly defined grave goods. A biography usually concerns uniform sets or isolated artefacts (Joy 2009: 540–544). This paper discusses the issue from the perspective of biographical events common to many objects (coffins). The aim was to identify past and present functions by determining the life cycle of a coffin: from its manufacturing (determination of its manufacturer and recipient; manufacturing techniques; the shape; the size; ornamentation) through ‘participation’ in a funeral ceremony, including transportation of the dead to the church, viewing, inhumation, and the period of ‘concealment’, to its revival (e.g. as a museum exhibit).

## The manufacturing of a coffin

In cities, joiners, chest makers, carpenters, and woodcarvers usually competed for the right to make wooden coffins, which led to conflicts between guilds. In modern Bremen, coffins, with planks joined with joiner's techniques, were usually made by joiners, whereas coffins made by carpenters were nailed together (Kizik 1998: 96; 2001: 204). In the country, coffin makers were usually neighbours, not necessarily qualified craftsmen, typically 'strangers', meaning non-relatives (Biegeleisen 1930: 177). In most cases, it is impossible to determine the producer of a specific coffin, however, identification of the wood processing methods employed allows to assess the maker's skills.

Certain actions, involving various customs and beliefs connected with the preparation of a coffin, are indicated by ethnographic sources concerning rural areas. In the south-eastern territory of Poland, it was believed that

there should be no knots in the coffin lid over the head of the dead or at least they should not fall out as through the knot hole the dead would see the world and might take one of the relatives with him (Biegeleisen 1930: 179).

Furthermore, it was not right to bargain over the price of the coffin so that it did not burden the soul of the dead. This was also why no measurements were taken (Fischer 1921: 157–159).

Due to this mostly individual production, confirmed by archaeological research, no two identical objects are found among late medieval and modern coffins (Wąsik 2006: 143–144; Králíková 2007; Trawicka 2011: 4–5; Majorek, Grupa 2013: 69–82; Drązkowska 2014: 297–315; Grupa et al. 2014: 27–38; Majorek, Grupa 2014: 91–106; Ströbl 2014; Dudziński et al. 2015: 84, 86–87, 89, 91, 93, 95; Ginter 2015: 165–195; Grupa et al. 2015a: 28–46; Grupa et al. 2015b: 35–38; Kjellberg 2015: 163–171; Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 19–70; *Der vergessene Friedhof...* 2015; Janowski 2016: 293–356; Majorek 2016: 51–64; Niedźwiadek 2016: 333–368; Vasilieva 2016: 296–308; Alterauge et al. 2017; Dudziński et al. 2017: 110–116; Majorek 2019). Their individualisation mostly had the form of changing their shape, covering them with coloured paints, upholstering, using selected wood-carving techniques, and placing inscriptions, signs and/or portraits on external panels. The manufacturing process and the skills of the maker can be determined through technological and typological analysis of coffins. Recognising wood species of special characteristics (e.g. not found locally) can indicate the place of origin of the material, while dendrochronological analysis may specify the dating. During the initial stage of research into coffins, it seems key to determine the shape of the coffin in cross-section and in plan view, based on the typology according to A. Ströbl (2014), J. Kjellberg (2015: 169). These analyses were used by the Author to create a typological key for the artefacts described, which was an



**Fig. 1.** Coffins with different types of ornamentation (the Church of the Most Holy Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn): a) a plant-like ornament; b) inscriptions; c) woodcarving decorations; d) upholstery (photograph by M. Majorek).

element of her PhD thesis (Majorek 2019: 75–78). Basically, coffins evolved from simple forms, with quadrangular cross-section and flat lids, to complicated forms, with polygonal cross-section and the so-called ‘inflated’, convex lid. The coffin shape was also influenced by instructions left in last wills and testaments (requests for a modest burial) as well as secular and church law. Coffin individualisation is more visible in the ornamentation. A popular form of ornamentation was painting with specially selected colours. Many colours were used to cover external plates, in different combinations – black and white, blue and red or white, or yellow and brown – which we can see on coffins in, for example, the crypts of the church in Szczuczyn (Majorek 2019: 89–109), the Holy Trinity Church in Radzyń Podlaski (Author’s observations), the Lublin Archcathedral (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 28), and the crypt of the Church of the Finding of the Holy Cross and Saint John the Apostle in Końskowola (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 54). The common denominator for coffins painted white, blue, and red was the fact that in most cases they were coffins of children and young people, perhaps maidens and bachelors (Grupa et al. 2014: 47). Coffins painted black were usually coffins of monks and nuns, and sometimes adult laymen (Majorek 2019: 95, 98). Important changes only took place in the middle of the nineteenth century, when black coffins became much more popular. This can be exemplified by such coffins found in the crypts of the church in Pluty and the Frombork Archcathedral (Author’s observations). Brown, different shades of yellow, and natural wood colours were used on coffins of the adult dead, examples of which are burials in such coffins in the crypts of the Holy Trinity Church in Byszew and in the crypt of the Church of Saint Adalbert the Martyr in Biała Rawska (Author’s observations).

What makes each of the coffins unique are figurative representations, including mostly original, handmade ornaments, and inscriptions. Coffins with woodcarving and upholstery decorations were less frequent, so potentially more distinctive (Fig. 1a, b, c, d). Coffins with upholstery decorations, though rare, were used to bury the dead in, for example, the crypts of the church in Szczuczyn (Majorek 2019: 110–129), the Lublin Archcathedral (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 33–34; Grupa et al. 2015b: 34), the church in Dubno in Ukraine (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 58–59), in Opole Lubelskie (Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 59, 60 – Fig. 37), Gniewkowo (Majorek, Grupa 2014: 96), Frombork, Byszew, and Biała Rawska (Author’s observations).

Woodcarving skills were used to create coffins that, along with the remains of the dead, can be found in, for example, the crypts of the church in Gniew (Grupa et al. 2015b: 14–15, 35–38), Gdańsk, Radzyń Podlaski (Author’s observations), Przeczno (Sulkowska-Tuszyńska 2016: 137–138), and Szczuczyn (Majorek 2019: 130–140). Such objects are also found in Central and Eastern Europe – in Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine (Ströbl 2014; Alterauge et al. 2017; Niedźwiadek et al. 2015: 58).

People are constant observers of life and phenomena connected with it. Thus, the very existence of a coffin conveyed a certain message. Its appearance determined the insights of the observers or ‘witnesses’. It allowed to draw conclusions with regard to religiousness as well as the socioeconomic status of the dead and their families. Coffins, however, were mostly a testimony to death. Thus, it can be said that they served an **informative** function.

### A coffin during a funeral ceremony and the time of ‘concealment’

The body of the dead was put in a properly prepared and decorated coffin. This marked the beginning of a long journey, both literally and metaphorically. From that moment on, the coffin drew the attention of participants of the funeral and constituted a barrier between the living and the dead, thus serving a **protective** function. It was the coffin with the body of the dead that stood in the centre of *castrum doloris*. The protective function also involved the practical sphere. Funeral ceremonies lasting many days, weeks, or even months required the body to be properly prepared. Of course, it could be embalmed, which was done in the case of those from the highest class. However, one should bear in mind that even in the case of the most impoverished gentry or burghers burials were frequently delayed. A properly prepared coffin protected the body against rapid decomposition, and in the case of putrefaction, it did not allow its products to be publicly seen. Decomposition products give off highly unpleasant smell, which is why coffins



**Fig. 2.** A double coffin of Stanisław August Szczuka (the Church of the Most Holy Name of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Szczuczyn) (photograph by M. Majorek).



**Fig. 3.** A child's burial in a coffin with a large amount of herbs (the Church of the Most Holy Name of the Blessed Lady Mary in Szczuczyn) (photograph by M. Majorek).

were sealed with wood tar or even double coffins were used (Fig. 2). An example of a double coffin is an artefact from the crypts of the church in Szczuczyn, in which Stanisław Antoni Szczuka – founder of the church – was buried. He died in 1710 and was transported from Warsaw to Szczuczyn, and the funeral ceremonies ended a year after his death (Dudziński et al. 2013: 10). However, this solution was not always adopted. In most cases, herbs (Fig. 3) used as lining under the internal upholstery and the filling of the mattress and pillows were enough to slow down the decomposition process, at the same time keeping insects away and containing the unpleasant smell. Once the coffin with the body was buried in ground or placed in a crypt, the coffin box still served its protective function. It protected against the direct influence of the environment: water, air, and living organisms including people.

At this stage, coffins also served a very important **informative** function on a number of planes. Just like at the stage of creation, they informed about death, providing much data about the dead they protected. The way they were made was a very good indicator of how old an individual was at the time of their death and of their financial situation. Painted coffins were definitely cheaper than the upholstered ones, particularly those upholstered with silk. The symbolism of figurative representations was also strongly connected with the religious message. In most cases, a cross was placed on the lids of coffins in which Catholics were

buried, and less frequently there were also short monograms on the sides: Marian and IHS (Author's observations). Participants of a funeral ceremony could 'see' who had been taken away by death and in what circumstances.

### 'Revival'

Coffins discovered during archaeological research get 'revived'. Documentation is drawn up, specialist analyses are carried out, and based on them attempts are made to identify burials and to interpret other finds on which time had left its mark. It is more and more common to undertake activities with the aim to display artefacts again, for example, in the form of a museum exhibition in the vault of the church, just like in the Archcathedral of John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist in Lublin, the church of St. Nicholas in Gniew, and the Archcathedral of St. John the Baptist and the Assumption of Mary in Przemyśl, or in museums, which can be exemplified by an exhibition held from the middle of April 2015 to the middle of July 2016 in the former hospital complex of the Holy Spirit in Frombork, entitled *Dębowa kamizelka – skrzynka – drewniana jesionka. Trumna – ostatnie mieszkanie zmarłego, znak odejścia oraz przejścia w zaświaty* (*An Oak Vest – a Box – a Wooden Coat. A Coffin – the Last Home of the Dead, a Symbol of Departure and Moving to the Afterlife*). History also knows of coffins that were revived more than once. Reusable coffins, with hinged flaps on the bottom, were called economy coffins, and their originator was Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II Habsburg. At a funeral, directly over the pit, handles were released, the bottom opened, and the body dropped into the grave. The obligation to use such structures was a result of the sanitary and epidemic situation in Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century (Kizik 1998: 98).

At the 'revival' stage, coffins once again serve an **informative** function. Similarly to their past role, coffin decorations can provide a basis for attempts to estimate the cost of a given artefact, the time of manufacturing, and the socio-economic status of the dead and their families. However, on the interpretive level, one should remain careful as historical sources mention families running up debts to hold an elaborate funeral ceremony as well as requests for modest burials made by wealthy people in their last wills and testaments.

It seems that the most important data is offered by the state of preservation of the coffin. Good or very good state of preservation of the structures suggests to archaeologists and anthropologists good state of preservation of bone remains, and sometimes of mummified bodies and grave goods (**protective** function), opening up research possibilities. Poor state of preservation makes analysis and result interpretation more difficult. Favourable environmental conditions allowing to preserve coffin burials in good state were found in the crypts of the church in Szczuczyn.



**Fig. 4.** The painting *The Funeral of Juliet* by Władysław Czachórski, 1874, inv. no. MP5263MNW (<http://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/>).

Many of the human remains there were mummified, and nearly all grave goods preserved their original shape, colour, and ornamentation. It is a unique situation, with virtually no analogy in the territory of Poland. However, many crypts offer good conditions, and the amount of information obtained is directly proportional to the skills and experience of archaeologists conducting research.

After their revival, coffins also serve **verification purposes**, confirming or denying information from ethnographic, historical, and artistic sources. In the course of the research conducted by the Author, it turned out that these three types of sources provide different data (Majorek 2019: 43–62). Rituals connected with the preparation of a coffin, the appearance of painted coffins, and animal behaviour indicating upcoming death are all described in ethnographic literature but it mostly concerns the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historical sources also have their flaws. In most cases, they concern wealthy people. Instructions in last wills and testaments about the appearance of coffins could considerably distort their actual image. Representatives of the gentry frequently asked for a modest burial and a grey or black coffin, whereas coffins found in crypts are usually colourful. Despite this data that might mislead readers, it should be emphasised that without written sources it would be impossible to identify burials. Written sources used by historians include all kinds of birth records, death certificates, and baptism certificates, without which it would never be possible to identify individuals. Thus, coffins with inscriptions, sings, and portraits also serve an **identification function**. Finally, when visual arts are concerned, paintings and drawing have provided ‘images’ that accompanied participants of funeral ceremonies (Fig. 4). Without them, many elements, including certain objects and behaviours, would have been lost to us.



## Conclusions

There are no two identical coffins and the history of each of them is unique, which makes this research subject extremely interesting, however, it does not make interpretive processes easier (e.g. determination of the maker, the time of manufacturing, identification of the dead etc.). A general look at coffins made it possible to create their biographies and to identify a number of common characteristics and functions. It turned out that at all stages of its 'life cycle', a coffin served an informative function. Initially, it informed about death, then about the identity of the dead, and then once again about the dead but in the context of research possibilities allowing to tell their story. At the same time, it protected against the eyes of the living, then against quick natural decomposition, and most probably also against plunder. The moment it was again seen by the living, it started serving a verification and identification function, valuable to researchers in the field. As it was already mentioned in the paper, this is not the end as coffins more and more often appear in museums or are displayed in church vaults. They acquire a new function as they educate the public, influence tourism, encourage reflection, and revive the memory of the dead.

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## Summary

### Modern Wooden Coffins – A Biography of Things

This paper discusses the issue of a biography of a coffin from the perspective of biographical events common to many modern artefacts from the Polish territory. The aim was to identify past and present functions by determining the life cycle of a coffin: from its manufacturing (determination of its manufacturer and recipient; manufacturing techniques; the shape; the size; ornamentation) through 'participation' in a funeral ceremony, including transportation of the dead to the church, viewing, inhumation, the period of 'concealment', to its revival (e.g. as a museum exhibit). It was determined that at each stage of its 'life', the coffin served informative and protective purposes. Additionally, at the stage of its revival, it serves an important verification and identification function from the perspective of researchers in the field. Moreover, preservation of individual burials in coffins and crypts promotes sacral tourism; coffins in the church space have enormous exhibition potential that can be used to build a national and local community.

**Keywords:** coffins, biography of things, modern era

## Streszczenie

### Nowożytny trumny drewniane – biografia rzeczy

W poniższym artykule omówiono zagadnienie biografii trumny przez pryzmat zdarzeń biograficznych wspólnych dla wielu nowożytnych obiektów z ziem polskich. Celem tych działań było wskazanie dawnej i obecnej funkcji trumny przez rozpoznanie ciągu jej życia – od jej powstania (ustalenie wytwórcy i odbiorcy; techniki wykonania, kształtu, wielkości, zdobień), poprzez „uczestnictwo” w ceremonii pogrzebowej, w tym eksportację zmarłego do świątyni, „wystawienie”, złożenie w grobie, czas „ukrycia” – do jej powrotu do życia (np. jako eksponat muzealny). Ustalono, że na każdym etapie „życia”, trumna pełniła rolę informacyjną i ochronną. Dodatkowo, na etapie powrotu do życia przyjmuje ona cenną dla badaczy tematu funkcję weryfikacyjną i identyfikującą. Ponadto konserwacja pochówków indywidualnych w trumnach oraz krypt sprzyja promowaniu turystyki obiektów sakralnych, a w przestrzeni świątyni trumny posiadają szczególnie potencjał wystawienniczy, który może zostać wykorzystany w celu budowania narodowej i lokalnej wspólnoty.

**Słowa kluczowe:** trumny, biografia rzeczy, nowożytność

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