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The Coffin Portrait Phenomenon and Its Nascence in Polish-Sarmatian Culture

Fenomen portretów trumiennych i jego narodziny w kulturze polsko-sarmackiej

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Słowa kluczowe: portret trumienny, sarmatyzm, ryt, symbol, fenomen

Introduction

The coffin portrait is a unique phenomenon in European culture and art. With the exception of Fayum portraits [Montserrat 1993], the coffin portrait appears in Baroque painting only within the limits of cultural influence of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The appearance of coffin portraits in the sixteenth century on Polish territory is not accidental, but directly related to the political and state situation of that time.

It is also worth noting that the term ‘coffin portrait’ as well as all the attributes that accompany the funeral procession of a Polish nobleman (for example, a hearse—*Castrum Doloris*, epitaph inscriptions, coats of arms, etc.), originates from the period of historical Polish culture called Sarmatism.

Art historians associate the coffin portrait phenomena with the process of the enfranchisement of society from the influence of religion, as well as the reduction of the role of religious ties in society.

Each member of the gentry attached great importance to the coffin portrait, as they considered it proof of the ancientness of their lineage.

Review of the literature

For this topic, I first considered the history of Sarmatism as a term. I then analyzed three main aspects: 1) all the factors which influenced coffin portraits in

Poland, 2) the ideological and world perspectives within Polish society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and 3) the reason for which Polish nobility attached significance to the funeral rite and all of its associated attributes.

In order to do this, I turned to the following sources: The features of funeral rites, as well as all the attributes accompanying the noble funeral procession, the state and mythological meaning of the concept of Sarmatism are analyzed and discussed by L. Tananaeva [1979], A. Nowicka-Jeżowa [2000], J. Orzeł [2010], D. Montserrat [1993], M. Barłowska [2014], also the symbolism of the coffin portrait, its origin, the history of its genesis on the territory of the Commonwealth was analyzed by K. Murawska-Muthesius et al. [2001], S. Wiliński [1958], E. Moon [2021], M. Flis [1993]. The sociological, philosophical and psychological component of the concept of the phenomenon and the function of the funeral ceremony was considered and analyzed by PL. Berger and T. Luckmann [1966], A. Comte [1936 (1830–1842)], S. Freud [1930], A. Radcliffe-Brown [1956], K. Kołodziejczyk [2018], and C. Fägerström et al. [2020, pp. 1–3].

Methodology

I used historical chronology to analyze the origins of the term Sarmatism. The paper also presents an analysis of the function of the coffin portrait phenomenon.

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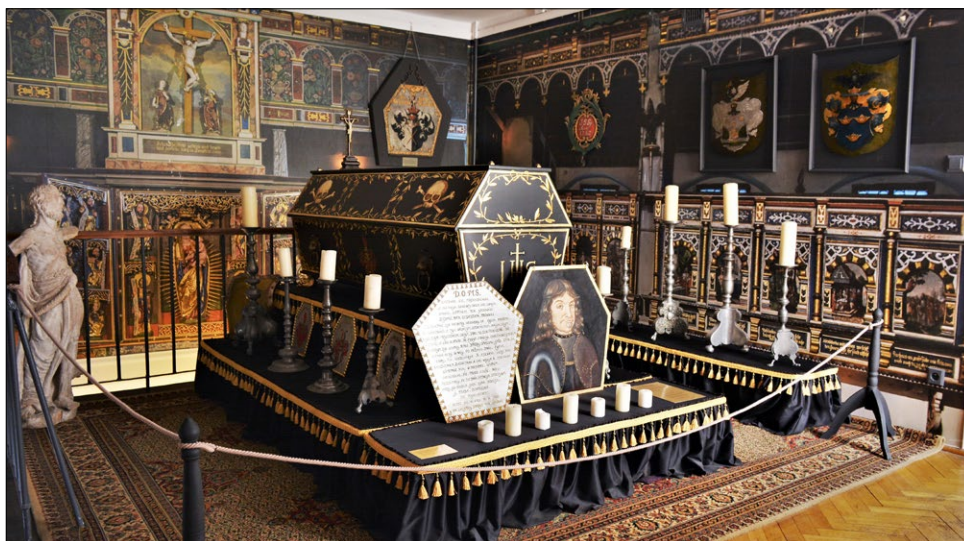


Fig. 1. Castrum Doloris by Sebastian Troschke, design and implementation: Ewa Rys, 2017, the Alf Kowalski Museum of the Międzyrzecz Region in Międzyrzecz, 2021; photo by Ł. Bednaruk
 Ryc. 1. Castrum Doloris Sebastiana Troschke, projekt i realizacja: Ewa Rys, 2017, Muzeum Ziemi Międzyrzeckiej im. Alfa Kowalskiego w Międzyrzeczu, 2021; fot. Ł. Bednaruk

The concept of Sarmatism and how it relates to Polish culture

Sarmatism was an ideological justification for the concept of the noble nation. In historical Poland, the term Sarmatism did not exist. It first appeared in the 1760s as a result of Enlightenment critique [Orzeł 2015].

The inhabitants of the Polish territory in the sixteenth century, which was extensive after the Union of Lublin that merged the Polish Crown and Lithuania into a single state, were not linked by a common language, faith, or customs. This is one reason why the concept of Sarmatia played an important role as an element that integrated the nobility as a social group [Flis 1993].

Also during this period there was an absolute discrepancy between the freedom of the nobles and the rest of the population. Freedom was a major political idea; a justification for maintaining the status quo and a guiding rule of action. This state of affairs smoothly led to the incipience of the ideology of Sarmatism [Tananaeva 1979]. Sarmatism combined political ideology with Baroque culture, generating its own path of life, mentality and morality, which made Sarmatian funerals a unique sight. There was such diversification within the noble mechanism that the principles of equality were not respected in practice.

One of the ways to implement the principle of equality was the funeral rite. A retinue (funeral procession) enacted the entry of mounted knights into the church, the fall of an *archimimus* [Barłowska 2014] off a horse in the armor of the deceased, and the breaking of a spear on a coffin. In the *pompa funebris*, a dominant role was played by sermons and eulogies. Like a Baroque opera, the funerary spectacle should be inter-

preted as an integral metaphor by which all languages of theater express the mystery of death. The symbolic essence, which permeated the entire emblematic-conceptual rite, took on a particular expressiveness in the eschatological perspective. The funerary orator was an interpreter who explained the symbolic sense of circumstantial architecture and its accompaniments. The expressive intensity of military funerals proved that chivalry lay at the heart of the Sarmatian sacred space [Nowicka-Jeżowa 2000].

Christoffer Fägerström [2020, p. 3] described the details of the burial of Bishop Peder Winstrup :

The body was dressed in a ceremonial vestment, including gloves and a cap. It rested on two pillows and a mattress of silk fabric [...].

Since the state of constant warfare became a familiar atmosphere for the inhabitants of historical Poland, a certain view of the world was formed, in which death was no longer something unusual or unnatural. When the rapture of battles dimmed, the underside of military glory opened up, irony arose (including concerning oneself).

Getting back to the subject of Sarmatism, it should be noted that the historiographers of the sixteenth century (for example, Mechowitz, Marcin Bielski, Marcin Kromer, Maciej Strykowski, Stanisław Sarnicki) created and spread the myth of Sarmatian origin. In cases where there were no arguments to support certain theses, a corresponding tradition was created.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Sarmatian myth had spread thanks to writers and poets, thanks to whom Sarmatia became synonymous with the Commonwealth, and the Sarmatians became its inhabitants. However, in the future, the concept of Sarmat-

tians and Sarmatism would become associated solely with the representatives of the nobility [Orzeł 2015].

The increased mythologized awareness affected the specific genealogical taste of the gentry. Stanisław Wiliński [1958] called this process “ancestral snobbery.”

The aforementioned phenomenon contributed to the nascence of numerous galleries of ancestors—*antenaci*—as it was then said. Such an aspiration to genealogy had the most direct effect on the development of the portrait: the demand for images of ancestors grew. In Poland, there were specialists who memorized entire systems of branched family ties. Great importance was attached to these kinship ties in Poland.

In a state where anarchy reigned was becoming increasingly prevalent, where ties between individuals and social groups were significantly weakened, the family acquired a truly exceptional value. The role of a judge in various ethical and moral conflicts, the role of the guardian of traditions, and the highest authority were given to the family. Historical Polish writings idealized not only the ancestors, but also the political rule they created: complete equality and freedom, an absence of the king’s desire for absolute power and an absolute freedom of the nobility to elect rulers. Praise for a simple life, on the one hand, pomp and gorgeousness, on the other, especially noticeable in art, meant that Sarmatian culture was unique, as were the moral ideals that the nobility adhered to.

The cult of individuality that had existed amongst the nobility was later adopted by the burghers, which undoubtedly had an effect on the contemporary Polish national consciousness.

S. Żeromski [1957, p. 35] wrote his opinion on the philosophy and symbolism of the Sarmatian funeral rite:

A nation lives both in the present day and in the darkness of its history. It moves forward, struggling and straining, but its head and eyes are turned to the past, where alone it perceives its living image, the assurance that it is not a phantom.

The coffin portrait – a line between faith and vanity

The genesis of the Polish coffin portrait is associated with an ancient funeral ritual—the participation of the double of the deceased as the main actor of the ceremony. This custom was known in Poland.

Here we will take a closer look at the concept of the double, or *archimimus*, and its role in the Sarmatian funeral rites. The nobility of the Commonwealth, although it turned into a landed estate in the sixteenth century, always referred to itself as the knighthood. Knightly ideals and the customs related to them occupied a special place in Sarmatian culture. Perhaps their most eloquent expression were funeral ceremonies. Those of particularly significant people were described in private correspondence and in diaries, and even special accounts of funerals were made. The color red was seen as symbolic, as it was used by knights (especially



Fig. 2. Alexander von Unruh, 1637–1668, oil, tin plate; origin: old Evangelical collection in Pieski; the Alf Kowalski Museum of the Międzyrzecz Region in Międzyrzecz, 2014; photo by Ł. Bednaruk, S.0049

Ryc. 2. Alexander von Unruh, 1637–1668, olej na płycie cynkowej; źródło: kolekcja staroewangelicka w Pieskach; Muzeum Ziemi Międzyrzeckiej im. Alfa Kowalskiego w Międzyrzeczu, 2014; fot. Ł. Bednaruk, S.0049

the fallen). On the day of the funeral, trumpets and drums sounded, the procession consisted of foot and horse banners and guests, but its most important figure was the so-called *archimimus*—who, wearing a fully golden cuirass under a mantle, rode on a horse dressed with a crimson satin cape that flowed to the ground, and carried a red gonfalon with two large tails.

The role of the figure that symbolized the deceased ended only in the church, when its task was to break a spear on the coffin as a sign of death and the end of the knight’s service; this custom also accompanied royal funerals.

The ceremony was also co-created by words: funerary sermons and secular speeches, in which the deceased’s chivalric deeds were recalled, creating an example for posterity [Barłowska 2014].

It can be added that over time, during the formation of the coffin portrait, both types of visual demonstration—a picturesque image and a living participant—took part in the burial, being equally significant independently of each other.

The point to note is that the origins of the coffin portrait lie in the field of tomb sculpture, and specifically tombs that have survived outside modern Poland. The genesis of the phenomenon of the Sarmatian portrait dates back to the Middle Ages and is closely connected with the sacralized, death-marked (funeral) image—an epitaph, first in relief, and from the middle of the sixteenth century—a refined sculptural portrait. The first images of the Sarmatians, therefore, were not in dwellings—chambers and palaces—but in churches and religious places.

The coffin portrait reflected a theatrical performance of inevitable phenomena and therefore belonged to the same current of *pompa funebris*—the Sarmatian art of “good dying,” as the picturesque images of “round dances” and “dances with death,” the so-called Dances of Death, which appeared in European art between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The funeral as a rite of “passage” links two types of time that functionalists [Lewis, Weigert 1981, pp. 432–462] have identified in the present (in the actualistic aspect) and structural time; since death is both an actualistic and structural event for a particular social group. The present (in the actualistic aspect), which is a set of relationships that arise between recurring natural phenomena, acquires significant meaning through routine actions or a series of actions. For this reason, it was common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to prepare for a person’s funeral while they were still alive. Structural time, on the other hand, includes the succession relations that arise in the events enacted in the social structure.

Per Auguste Comte’s [1936, p. 39–45] definition of social structure as the relationship that arises between social roles, death is a phenomenon that shapes these relationships of continuity; as this implies the need to restructure the group.

The funeral rite, which gives ritual expression to the transition of the deceased from the temporal order to the sacred, combines two types of time: the present (in the actualistic aspect) and structural time. The death of a person creates a vacuum in individual and collective consciousness, and the preservation of some trace of the deceased in the temporal order helps to fill it. In the early Middle Ages, the “tool” for preserving this trace was the epitaph. Later, with the strengthening of the Sarmatian ideology with its characteristic individualism, the coffin portrait appeared.

Art historians associate the coffin portrait with the process of reduction and laicization of late medieval epitaphs. This idea can be supplemented by the fact that the phenomenon of the coffin portrait is also a consequence of the validation at the symbolic level of the then existing social order. As a ritual symbol, it transferred the existing social order to the religious realm along with the deceased.

Berger and Luckman [1966, pp. 110–147] indicate four levels of legitimization: 1) the linguistic; 2) that of ‘commonplace’ theories, for example traditions, parables, moral maxims, proverbs; 3) that of scientific theories; and 4) the symbolic. It is only the symbolic level that is relevant for the purpose of this argument. The participation of art in processes of legitimization has both a social and an individual character.

From the point of view of Sigmund Freud [1930], with which it is difficult to disagree:

Art always plays a decisive role in the processes of symbolic legitimization, thanks to which the idea of the natural unity of all life becomes possible.

It was this function that the coffin portrait performed. Radcliffe-Brown [1956] analyzed the concept of “the function of the funeral rite” as follows:

The continuity of the social structure, like that of an organic structure, is not destroyed by changes in the units. Individuals may leave the society, by death or otherwise; others may enter it. The continuity of structure is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities (e.g. funeral ceremonies) and interactions of the individual human beings and of the organized groups into which they are united. The social life of the community is here defined as the functioning of the social structure. The concept of function as here defined thus involves the notion of a structure consisting of a set of relations amongst unit entities, the continuity of the structure being maintained by a life process made up of the activities of the constituent units.[...] Rites gave regulated expression to human feelings which are difficult to verbalize and thus sustained those feelings which, by controlling or influencing human behavior, made possible the existence and continuation of an orderly social life.

In the process of symbolic legitimation, this function (maintaining structural continuity) is performed by art, and such phenomena as a coffin portrait as a central element of the funeral rite.

Conclusions

Analysis and study of the concept of Sarmatism showed that it is an ideology unique among all European states, mythologized and supported by the belief of the Sarmatian nobles that the order and structure of their life is “Chosen by God.”

Also, having considered the historical context of this term, we can conclude that due to the large number of wars that took place on the territory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the attitude towards death changed, which later became one of the factors in the nascence of “ancestral galleries” and “coffin portraits.”

An analysis of the function of the coffin portrait phenomenon showed that, while remaining a secular image, the coffin portrait always balanced on the verge of a portrait and an icon. The portrait “enters the territory of sacred art, but does not cross it.” In the Sarmatian portrait, a process of formation is visibly taking place: not the evolution of some initial stylistic data, but the nascence of a new type of artistic formations. From the point of view of Katarzyna Kołodziejczyk [2018]:

As one of the basic formal arts, it (the portrait) shapes not only the ideal of beauty in space and time, but in combination with other fields of art, it touches more subtle areas, aspects of truth and goodness.

Also speaking of the symbolism of such a phenomenon as a coffin portrait, it should be noted that

symbolic legitimation through the mechanism of “re-integration,” carried out at the highest possible level in a given culture—the symbolic level—provides the most perfect type of cultural integration. The coffin portrait was just such a symbol that regulated

both—the way of thinking and the mode of action, for it was an integral part of two dimensions of culture—the vision of the world that was then in effect and ethos (manifested in ritual) [Berger, Luckmann 1966, pp. 110–147].

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Abstract

This article discusses the features, hidden meanings, as well as the origin of coffin portraits. Special attention is paid to their nascence within the Polish territory. The theme of the burial of the Polish gentry has been researched and analyzed. The historical component of the concept of Sarmatism is discussed: where it originates from and how it influenced the development of the culture of the Baroque era. As part of this study, the author identified the factors that influenced the Polish nobles perspective on death, and the State, which later manifested in the form of a funeral rite and its attendant attributes. The author explored a set of issues related to the mythology and symbolism of the concept of Sarmatism in the Baroque period and the importance of genealogy for the nobles which later influenced the development of the coffin portrait. Despite religious beliefs, the Polish nobility always chose conceited pomposity to represent death.

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł omawia cechy, ukryte znaczenia i pochodzenie portretów trumiennych. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono ich narodzinom na terytorium Polski. Przebadano i przeanalizowano temat pochówku szlachty polskiej. Omówiono historyczny komponent idei sarmatyzmu: skąd się wywodził i jak wpłynął na rozwój kultury w okresie baroku. Jako część badania autorka zidentyfikowała czynniki, które wpłynęły na spojrzenie polskiej szlachty na śmierć oraz państwo, które później zmaterializowały się w formie rytu pogrzebowego i towarzyszącym mu atrybutom. Autorka poruszyła problemy związane z mitologią i symbolizmem idei sarmatyzmu w epoce baroku i ważność genealogii dla szlachty, które następnie wpłynęły na rozwój portretów trumiennych. Pomimo wierzeń religijnych polska szlachta zawsze wybierała nadęcie i pompę w przedstawieniu śmierci.