

# THE URBAN GRAVEYARD

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

edited by

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# Taking stock of burial archaeology

## An emerging discipline in Denmark

*Lene Høst-Madsen*

### **Burial archaeology in Denmark**

Burials are one of the most highly regulated facets of a society. The customs and practices that regulate burials relate to religion and belief, and this makes the burial context different than other archaeological phenomena. This is also why burials are an outstanding source for investigating religious life of a society.

Protestantism has been the dominant form of Christianity in Denmark since 1536. This date also marks the end of the medieval period in Denmark. There is no strong tradition for archaeological excavation and documentation of Protestant cemeteries primarily because most of these cemeteries are still active. In this paper, I introduce the current state of burial archaeology in the post-medieval period in Denmark beginning with an examination of the guidelines and laws for working with archaeological excavations of burials in and outside existing cemeteries. I then review the studies of Protestant burials that have been carried out within the last 30 years, beginning with an investigation of the material culture of the coffins of two royal children buried in the Roskilde Cathedral excavated in the 1980s. I continue with a discussion of a series of archaeological excavations of cemeteries carried out from 2001 to 2011, including the Assistens Cemetery containing burials as recent as 1988. I conclude the introduction with a discussion of a World War II battlefield grave, which I argue is an example of a special case where the grave should be protected on site. Following the introduction, there is a general discussion of the problems and the potential regarding burial archaeology of modern graves. Post-medieval burial archaeology can provide new and important information, and the central question is what we gain from working with post-medieval burial archaeology.



The main difference between Danish and Dutch legislation is that in Denmark there is no tender process on 'development led' archaeology. In Denmark, local museums, divided into 40 administrative districts, are in charge of archaeological work (Fig. 1). These museums relate directly to the Danish Agency for Culture. The Agency for Culture has to approve the rationale of any archaeological work, assure quality control, and approve the budgets of all archaeological excavations conducted under the aegis of the Museums Act.

### **The history of post-medieval osteoarcheology in Denmark**

We will look at a sample of archaeological investigations of burials dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Denmark conducted during the last 30 years, and a selection of the most significant projects will be discussed.

The tradition of archaeological documentation of graves from the post-medieval period in Denmark is not well established. There are several reasons for this. First, most modern cemeteries are still actively used today. The dismantling of graves occurs as a part of the normal cycle of old graves being dug up to make room for new burials. This work is undertaken by the church and is not normally documented for archaeological purposes. Second, when it comes to archaeological excavations, there has been a tendency to ignore the dismantling of post-medieval graves, that is, when more recent burials are dug up to reveal medieval graves, grave details are recorded only for the medieval graves but not for the more recent ones. Fortunately, this is changing, and we are seeing a steady increase in the excavation and investigation of post-medieval burials. However, the published material on these burials is still very limited and generally of a provisional character.

One of the earliest examples of osteoarchaeology is an investigation from 1981 of several royal graves in a chapel at Roskilde Cathedral (Fig. 2, 1). The work took place during the restoration of the coffins of two young children, Prince Frederik Christian (1625-1627) and Princess Maria Cathrine (1628), the children of Kirsten Munk and Christian IV the King of Denmark and Norway. The focus was on the textiles in the coffins and not on the bodies because the only archaeological find of 17<sup>th</sup>-century brocade-knitted waistcoats originated from these graves as both children were wearing one.<sup>3</sup> The bodies were very well preserved and this led to the documentation of the textiles, so it is worth asking whether this investigation can be classified as osteoarchaeology. Still, the results suggest that post-medieval burials are important sources of information.

Almost twenty years would pass before another osteoarchaeological investigation of a grave crypt was conducted. As part of the renovation of Sankt Olai Church in Elsinore (Fig. 2, 2), 60 well preserved burials in crypts from the 18<sup>th</sup> century were documented and then encased in the church's new concrete floor. The burials were documented by physical anthropologist Pia Bennike from the Panum Institutet and curator and archaeologist Lone Hvass from the local museum in Elsinore. The work is published in Elsinore Museum's Yearbook.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Kruse *et al.* 1988, Ringaard 2014, 75.

4 Hvass *et al.* (eds.) 2002.

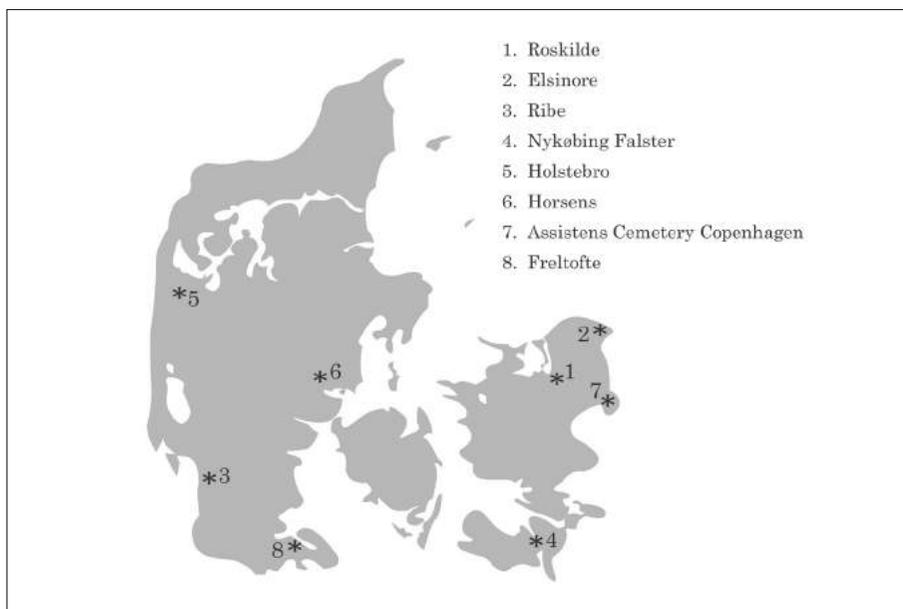


Fig. 2: The location of sites discussed in the text (Lene Høst-Madsen).

In the southwestern part of Denmark, at Ribe Cathedral, at a site called Lindegaarden, 503 individuals were excavated (Fig. 2, 3). Twenty-seven of the graves were situated in the Cathedral's ambulatory and were dated to around 1700. The excavation was of high quality with clear documentation of the outlay of the cemetery, the building structures, and the coffin assemblages, followed by a thorough physical anthropological analysis of the bone material. The results of the excavations have been published in an annual book on excavations from the area.<sup>5</sup>

The investigations at Roskilde Cathedral, Sankt Olai Church, and Ribe Cathedral represent burials from two crypts and one processional walkway. The practice of burial inside church buildings in Denmark was very popular from the medieval period onwards, as close proximity to the house of God was seen as closeness to God. As urbanization increased in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the practice decreased and was finally forbidden by a Royal Resolution passed on February 22, 1805.<sup>6</sup>

The only exception to the Resolution was the burial of members of the royal family. They have been buried in Roskilde Cathedral since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 2013, preparation of a crypt for the eventual burial of Queen Margrethe II and her husband Prince Henrik began and as a result, an excavation in the Cathedral ensued, carried out by the National Museum. The results have not yet been published, but the excavation was closely monitored by the public through a number of newspaper stories that reported on its process.<sup>7</sup>

5 Madsen & Søvsø 2010.

6 Lovbekendtgørelse LBK nr 906.

7 Ritzau 2013; Brudvig, 2013.

The next five cases are of a more general archaeological nature; they are earthen graves outside church buildings in existing or abandoned cemeteries, and as such, are similar to the prehistoric and medieval graves that fall within the jurisdiction of the Museums Act. The only difference is their post-medieval dating.

The first example, from around 2001, is an abandoned cemetery in southern Denmark that had been in use until around 1940 (Fig 2, 4). At some point it was incorporated into a parking lot for a large supermarket chain. The extensive discussion, primarily based on the ethics of digging up graves, included representatives from the Danish Agency for Culture, museum staff, and religious leaders who favored leaving the dead alone and protecting the site.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the project was halted because of negative publicity, and the cemetery is still sealed by the parking lot.

On the west coast of Jutland, in the city Holstebro, an excavation at the central city church also caused a stir (Fig. 2, 5). In 2007-08, part of a cemetery that had been abandoned in 1865 was to be excavated. Some of the local priests opposed bringing the excavated bodies to the Panum Institutet in Copenhagen for physical anthropological analysis. Newspapers covered the story extensively; again the main concern was the ethics of disturbing graves. Lutheran bishops spoke in favor of not disturbing the grave peace for 200 years, but their wish was not granted. The case was resolved by the reburial of 111 individuals out of the 293 excavated, although the remains were not reburied in the same place they had been taken from. One-hundred-and-eighty-two individuals of medical interest are still deposited at the Panum Institutet. All the excavated bone material underwent physical anthropological analysis before reburial, and the archaeological as well as the anthropological results are published in the yearbook from Holstebro Museum.<sup>9</sup>

A further excavation took place at a cemetery in Horsens on the east coast of Jutland, which is slightly older than the one in Holstebro (Fig. 2, 6). Approximately 500 individuals from the 18<sup>th</sup> century were excavated and underwent physical anthropological analysis. The results are published in an anthology on historical archaeology.<sup>10</sup>

The excavation of Assistens Cemetery in Copenhagen is the most recent cemetery excavated in Denmark (Fig. 2, 7). Even though the Metro Company has been criticised for choosing the Assistens Cemetery as a location for a station, the public has generally accepted and been interested in the excavations and the research results. The Assistens Cemetery – a cemetery without a church – opened in 1785 and was established as an overflow for churchyards in the increasingly crowded city. The area that was excavated was originally incorporated into the cemetery in 1806 and was reserved for parishioners from Trinitatis Church in the city centre. According to cemetery records, coffin burials took place in the area until 1984 and cremation burials until 1988.

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8 Sørensen, 2001; Steens 2008.

9 Thomsen 2008; Bennike 2008.

10 Grønfeldt 2012.

The excavation took place between December 2009 and February 2011 and was carried out under a separate agreement between the Museum of Copenhagen, the cemeteries of Copenhagen, the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, and the Metro Company. The work was carried out in accordance with the Danish Agency for Culture's standards and guidelines, and in many ways exceeded the work that would have been allowed under the Museum Act (Fig. 3).<sup>11</sup>

In all, 854 *in situ* inhumations and 81 cremations were excavated. Significant issues in the project were the ethical requirements inherent in the excavation of a cemetery from such a modern period. A set of ethical strategies was decided upon before the excavation began. Among other things, all the excavations of human remains were conducted under tents. All soil removed from the site was sifted for bones, and all the coffins, skeletons, and their associated artefacts were retained on site, recorded, and reburied in a new location in the cemetery during the fieldwork phase of the excavation. To ensure a high standard of documentation, a laboratory with a portable x-ray machine was set up on site and all skeletal remains, as well as other finds, were thoroughly investigated and documented before reburial.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the post-excavation analysis was done on site.

The last and most recent case study I would like to discuss in this short revue is the excavation of a single soldier's grave on a battlefield in the southern part of Denmark at Freltofte (Fig 2, 8). Museum Sønderjylland, the local museum, is aware that there are many unidentified soldiers buried in this particular area as this was the site of a large battle between Denmark and Germany in 1864. Based on historical sources, it is estimated that more than 100 soldiers lost their lives. Only a small number of graves have been identified. The museum monitors all development in the area to try to prevent the destruction of unidentified graves.

In 2013, a single soldier grave was found in connection with a water pipe project. The identification of the burial as a battle grave was based on a find of lead bullets in a cartridge bag typical for a Danish soldier from 1864. As soon as it was established that the skeleton belonged to a soldier, the water pipe project was halted. It was decided that the pipe would be located some distance from the grave so that it would not be disturbed. The soldier was reburied along with his belongings, including a bronze wedding ring. The grave was further protected by a stone marker erected on April 9, 2014 with the inscription: 'Here rests/An unknown Danish soldier/Died March 17, 1864/Grave discovered 2013/This stone erected in 2014' (Fig. 4).<sup>13</sup>

It is unfortunate that no further archeological excavation were carried out as soon as it was determined that the remains were from a soldier. Even a limited physical anthropological analysis combined with an attempt to determine whether there were more individuals in the grave would have provided important knowledge about the buried individual.

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11 Anthony *et al.* 2016, 8ff.

12 Anthony *et al.* 2016, 60.

13 Ethelberg & Kristensen 2014.



Fig. 3: Assistens Cemetery during excavation (Museum of Copenhagen).



Fig. 4: The unknown soldier memorial, near Freltofte (photo: Lene Høst-Madsen).

April 9, 1940 was the date of the World War II German invasion of Denmark and 2014 was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the 1864 war. To erect the commemorative stone on these two anniversaries sent out a powerful signal. Because of the proximity of this area to the German border, many families were directly affected by both World War I and II, and they still elicit a lot of emotion.

Even though the wars are long over, historical memory in the area still runs deep and many physical signs of the wars are present in the form of memorials. In light of this, it made good sense to keep the soldier in situ. In situ protection also corresponds well with the intent of the Danish Museum Act. However, in the end, the grave was not protected because the farmer who owned the field had second thoughts; the stone was moved the edge of the field and the grave itself is unmarked and unprotected. Eventually it will be destroyed through repeated cultivation.

### **Taking stock**

We have now looked at a sample of archaeological investigations of burials in Denmark dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conducted during the last 20 years. It is clear that there have been significant developments in the field. We have focused on excavations of approximately 2,000 burials (Elsinore – 60, Ribe – 503/27, Holstebro – 293, Horsens – 500, Copenhagen – 935).<sup>14</sup> These archaeological investigations were supplemented with a variety of development-sponsored excavations that were undertaken in areas with modern graves. The results and documentation in these cases often remain unpublished. I would estimate that there have been about 20-30 cases in the last ten years in addition to the National Museum's church studies. Most of these contained only a small number of burials. This means that museums continuously carry out archaeological development-led excavations of more recent burials in Denmark and that the importance of doing so is no longer questioned.

In the spring of 2014, the Danish Agency for Culture and the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs jointly issued guidelines on archaeological excavations of abandoned cemeteries.<sup>15</sup> These guidelines do not question the significance of archaeological investigations in connection with development work on abandoned cemeteries. Rather, the focus of the guidelines is on the physical anthropological and ethical aspects of investigations and to a lesser extent on the material culture (coffin handles, clothing, false teeth, beads, pins, artificial flowers, etc.).

### **The ethical aspects**

Even though in Protestant belief human bones are not sacred, ethical questions have still dominated the discussion of excavations of post-medieval graves. The simplest solution to the ethical problem is in situ conservation, which is in line with the intent of the Museum Act. However, the majority of archaeological excavations conducted are the direct result of development, and destruction of graves is inevitable. In the case of the battlefield grave in southern Jutland, it was possible to relocate the pipeline and thus protect the tomb; the problem was that the area was not protected afterwards. This links into another key issue, that abandoned cemeteries are not protected. There is nothing to prevent development and excavation in these areas. Here ethical considerations come into play, as they always should when it comes to the excavation of cemeteries. The Ministry of

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<sup>14</sup> Hvass *et al.* 2002, Madsen & Søvsø 2010, Thomsen 2008, Petersen 2012, Anthony *et al.* 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Vejledning nr. 9315.

Ecclesiastical Affairs/Agency for Culture guidelines, Chapter 9, regarding best practice “*Gode råd om arkæologiske undersøgelser på kirkegårdsarealer*” suggests that before any excavation begins, a clear and precise agreement between the different partners in the project (landowner, church, archaeologists) should be worked out on the following points:

- Protection of the archaeological area of interest from the public, e.g., fencing.
- Protection of specific areas within the site from excavation, e.g., protecting graves of a certain depth if the construction work will be shallow.
- Collecting all loose finds on the site and covering up skeletons every day before works halts for the day.
- The subsequent treatment and storage of bone material.
- Possible reburial of bone material.
- A joint press strategy.
- A joint strategy for dialogue with local residents.
- Restoration of the area after excavation.
- How to handle possible unexpected findings during construction work.<sup>16</sup>

The excavation at Assistens Cemetery is to date the only excavation where ethical considerations were taken into account; skeletal material was not shown to the public while the investigation was in progress and individuals were reburied on site. Such far reaching measures do not necessarily need to take place at every site. The key is to take a position on the issue in the initial stages of the planning of the archaeological work, and it is essential for archaeologists to be in constant dialogue with the church and the public.

It is worth noting that it is the church that has been most critical in relation to archaeological excavations of more recent burials and not the public, and its criticism focuses mainly on a desire to have the dead reburied and perhaps the grave peace extended.

My experience of working with excavations of post-medieval graves in Copenhagen for more than ten years is that the public generally thinks that it is good to have archaeologists conducting the work instead of having the dead removed by construction equipment.

## **Osteoarchaeology**

Abandoned cemeteries provide us with information on lifestyle and living conditions of people buried there, and the study of them is deeply rooted in physical anthropological studies: What was their diet? What was the state of their health? Did they experience periods of hunger? Was there a population group that differed significantly from other residents? Which diseases did they suffer from? Are there any signs of disease treatment? How tall were they? How old? There is no doubt physical anthropological analysis is the way to obtain knowledge on these very important questions. The large-scale archaeological excavations of human remains discussed in this paper make evident that bone material can be an excellent source of information on living conditions through the centuries. Most of the studies

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16 Vejledning nr. 9315.

discussed in this article were of a high calibre, and the studies were accompanied by thorough physical anthropological studies. The many burials in the major excavations discussed above (approximately 2,000) were situated primarily in towns (the only exception being the soldier from Freltofte), which means that there is a significant amount of bone material that can help us understand urban life in the 1700s and 1800s. Some of the Copenhagen material is as recent as the mid-1900s.

Peter Tarp from Antropologisk Afdeling ved Retsmedicinsk Institut, Syddansk Universitet i Odense, abbreviated as ADBOU, has compared the post-medieval bone material from Horsens with bone material from a medieval cemetery from the same city. He concludes that life expectancy increased by some four years between the medieval period and the 1700s. Leprosy disappeared and the first signs of cancer appeared. The appearance of cancer may be related to higher life expectancy and unhealthy lifestyle practices like smoking.<sup>17</sup> The popularity of tobacco smoking in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries can be clearly seen on teeth that have been affected by chewing on clay pipes; this is one of the significant features that typically comes to light in studies of graves from the 1700s (Fig. 5). Another example of the effects of the modern lifestyle is carious lesions that, like tobacco, have a clear connection to the colonies, in this case the importation of sugar.



*Fig. 5: Cranium from the Ribe excavation with clear tooth marks from pipe smoking (HAM/Sydvestjyske Museer).*

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17 Tarp 2012, 9.

Rickets and scurvy, both of which were detected in the remains of children at Horsens and Assistens Cemetery, are the result of malnutrition, and scurvy indicates limited access to sunlight. Furthermore, both diseases are considered to be affects of industrialization and urbanisation. Even though there is no comparative material from rural communities to help us understand rural living conditions, the data we do have indicates that urban life had its dark side, just as it does today.<sup>18</sup>

There can be no doubt that further research on human development in earlier and modern periods would be highly relevant. However, in Denmark, 'rescue' archeology does not generate research money; the developer is only obliged to pay for post-excavation analysis directly related to the excavated material and conservation but not for further research. This means that there is no money for synthesizing the data and publishing, which is probably the main reason for the lack of research done on bone material. Fortunately, but unusual, external funding has been secured for a postdoctoral thesis at the Panum Institutet on the human osteological remains from the Assistens Cemetery. This research will focus on the impact of urbanisation and industrialization on the human body in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and will hopefully reveal some of the potential this material possesses.

### **Material culture**

There is no doubt that material culture connected to cemeteries is accompanied by the same problems as the osteological analysis mentioned above. More research in classic archaeological studies such as the establishment of typology and possibly chronologies for grave outlines, coffin types, and the various ways that people have commemorated the dead throughout this particular period would increase our understanding of life in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Visible grave memorials are often well documented, and like church and cemetery records, contain a wealth of information on the function of the cemetery. New information may appear from future archaeological investigations. In studies of Assistens Cemetery, it was evident that the deaths of some individuals in the cemetery were not recorded in the church records. This was true, for example, for an area under a tree where apparently infant children were buried outside the cemetery's otherwise strict architectural lines. This also shows some of the potential in spatial analysis (Fig. 6).<sup>19</sup>

### **Emotion**

All tangible material culture in the form of coffin handles, casket designs and linings, textiles, and the form of burial is an important avenue of research in which the individual story can be given a personal touch. It is interesting, for example, that the wedding ring from the soldier grave, like objects from the tombs of Assistens, remained with the dead.

Two graves from the Assistens Cemetery, that of a two-and-a-half years old child buried with a red rubber ball and a child of 15 months buried with a porcelain doll, are examples of how emotions can be uncovered through the study of grave objects

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18 Petersen 2012, 293, Anthony *et al.* 2016, 261.

19 Høst-Madsen 2012, 573.

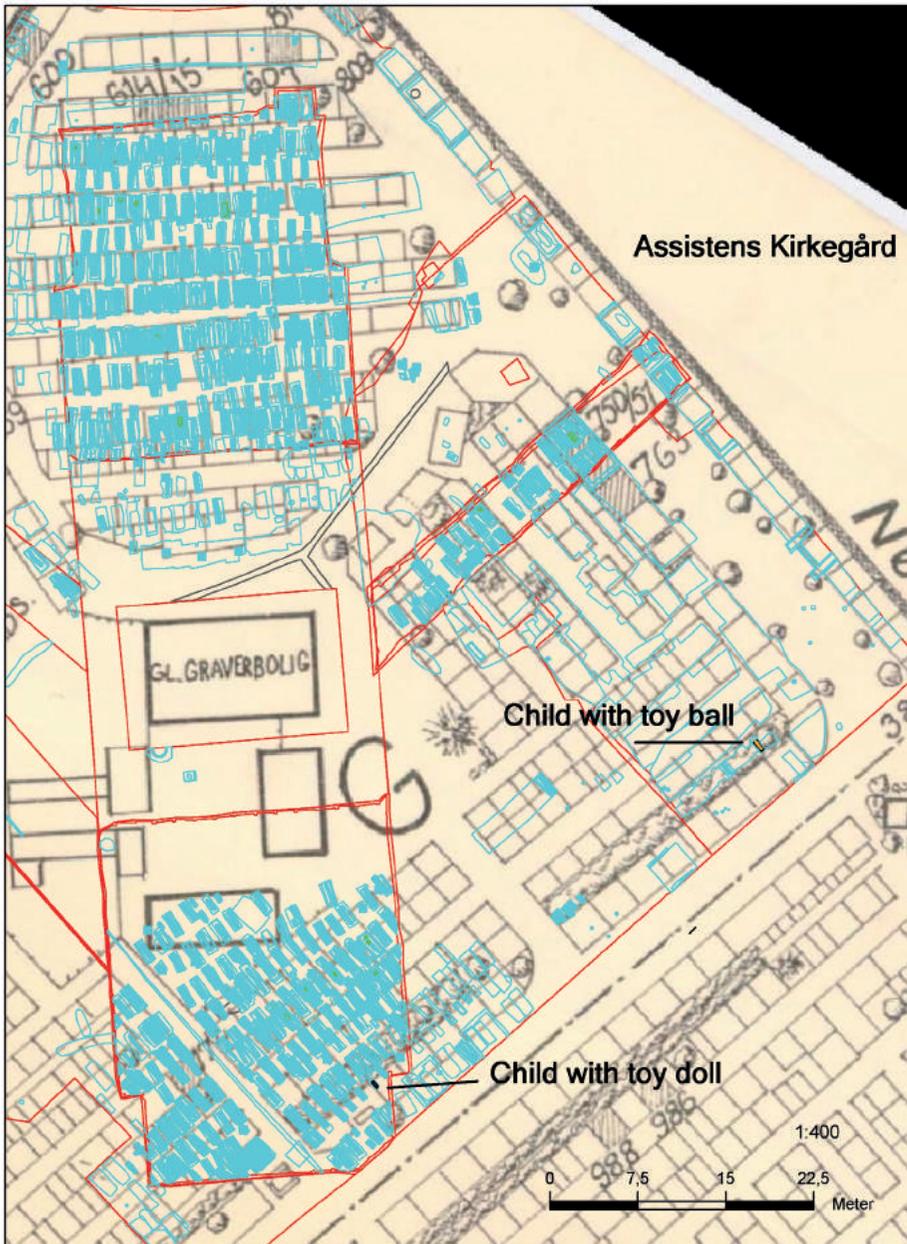


Fig. 6: Distribution of children's graves at Assistens Cemetery (Museum of Copenhagen).

(Fig. 7). When this material culture is held alongside the physical anthropological evidence that the first child had scurvy and the child with the doll suffered from rickets, we can picture poor nutrition combined with love and care.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Høst-Madsen 2012, 575.



*Fig. 7: Two graves, one with a child and a ball, one with a child and a doll (Museum of Copenhagen).*

The royal children buried in the Roskilde Cathedral were of a very different social category and time period than the children from Assistens. Here research is dominantly based on historical and iconographical sources and on the textiles recovered from the coffins; no osteological analysis was performed, and in that sense this investigation can be seen as the best indicator of the potential of the historical approach. However, a sense of the emotion that is connected to child burials is still present. Charlotte Paludan describes the opening of the coffins as follows: ‘Amidst the strange display of beauty and magnificence in conjunction

with discoloration and decomposition the two children's corpses in their silk garments mixed with silver and gold thread, gems and pearls formed a daunting *memento mori*'.<sup>21</sup> The analysis of the royal children's graves would have benefited from anthropological analysis, but they also clearly show the potential of material culture. Paludan concludes: 'After careful examination and photographing, the children and their burial clothes were once more laid to rest in their coffins and placed in the crypts of Roskilde Cathedral'.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced the current state of the archaeological work in post-medieval burial archaeology in Denmark, beginning with guidelines and laws. This was followed by a review of the published studies of Protestant burials carried out within the last 30 years. I end my paper by discussing the problems and the potential regarding burial archaeology of modern graves in Denmark.

There is no doubt that archaeological and osteological analysis provide important new knowledge regarding life and death, health and disease, love and belief in Danish society and that this knowledge is important for understanding the past and maybe even improving health in our society.

Archaeological and anthropological work turns bodies into archaeological objects. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate ethical expectations into any archaeological work carried out. This will ensure that while important new knowledge that has relevance for our understanding of the past as well as the present is gained, the dead will still be handled with respect. Modern detection methods can easily record the bodies and the material culture for posterity before the bodies are reburied. However, this does not mean that objects and bones should not be registered. This can be done with modern methods, and samples of physical anthropological material can be taken.

Based on the developments within this field during the last decade and the new guidelines, we have come a long way, but there is still a lot that needs to be done. When looking at archaeological burial material, it is clear that it is primarily from urban sites. Future research projects would benefit from documenting rural graveyards for comparison of both material culture and osteology. Hopefully, there will be more research and publications on the material that has already been excavated. Results is the best way to justify the importance of burial archaeology.

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21 Paludan 1988, 253.

22 Paludan 1988, 259.

Madsen and Tenna Kristensen from Museum Haderslev and Niels Terkildsen from Holstebro Museum.

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# THE URBAN GRAVEYARD

It is commonly believed that in medieval and post-medieval towns and cities death outnumbered births and that these urban centres could only survive through the influx of migrants; a concept which has come to be known as the urban graveyard effect. Whether this was indeed the case for all cities and towns is still debated, but it is certain that urban citizens were more used to death than we are today. The medieval graveyards in which the deceased were interred, then still located within town limits, are an invaluable source of knowledge for reconstructing past lives. Systematic archaeological and osteoarchaeological research of urban graveyards has become the norm in the Netherlands and Belgium since the 1980s. However, many of the studies remain unpublished and larger, overarching publications in which comparisons are made between different studies are still lacking.

*The urban graveyard* presents several studies in which the results of older archaeological and osteoarchaeological research are compared to more recent excavation data from several Dutch, Belgian and Danish cities and towns. Both the archaeological data concerning burial position, orientation, and grave goods as well as osteoarchaeological data such as demographic information and pathological observations are discussed. This well-illustrated volume is a starting point and source of inspiration for more (inter)national comparative research.



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