

SPECIALISTS OF THE UNSPEAKABLE: PERSONS ENGAGED IN THE LAYING OUT OF CORPSES IN IRELAND AND AUSTRIA.

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Specific aspects related to the traditional preparation of corpses for wakes and funerals are analysed. The two areas chosen for this comparative study were Ireland (years of 1938 and of 1978) and Austria (period between 1929 and 1935). All the actions involved in this preparation are considered both in terms of religious belief and practical functionalism. A third dimension can be added when aspects related to the psychology of grief are included.

As acções, atitudes e comportamentos associados à preparação dos cadáveres para velório e funeral na Irlanda (anos de 1938 e 1978) e na Austria (anos entre 1929 e 1935) são o objecto deste estudo comparativo. Os principais factores considerados podem-se classificar em três áreas: crenças religiosas, funcionalismo ligado a questões práticas e psicologia do desgosto.

INTRODUCTION

International universals of death culture had already been discovered in the late 19th century. Edward Burnett Tylor (1964:3) explained these similar symbols by "the like working of men's minds under like conditions". Studying death rituals modern Anthropology has done more than identifying such human universals: there are parts of symbolism with local impact; others seem to apply to particular regions, even if they can't be reported everywhere within it. Finally there are some very rare pieces that can be found throughout the world (Metcalf 1992:10).

The fact that European death culture in pre industrial rural society was discovered to be very similar caused some astonishment. A uniformity of religious concepts and popular beliefs in vast parts of Europe regardless cultural, political and confessional boundaries could not be explained

in terms of a Christian, Romanic, Germanic or Celtic origin. Consequently disciples of the mythological school were called upon. Following Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831-1880), these scholars tried to reconstruct Indo-European and ancient Germanic concepts of custom and belief (Bimmer 1988:314-316).

The most extensive treatment of the relationship between Ireland and other Indo-European cultures was undertaken by Hans Hartmann¹. His statements on Irish death customs were in most cases over-interpretative. He focused on an understandable system of hypothetical Indo-European religion with various abstract ideas.

A new approach to the comparison of death-culture has therefore to start again in a more

¹ Even though his book appeared only in 1952, his arguments were based on materials taken from the collections of the Irish Folklore Commission obtained during his visit in 1937.

sober light of criticism. In order to have a closer look at death customs I chose Ireland and Austria as two areas that did not have any obvious cultural relationship between each other.² The specific aspect of the traditional mortuary preparation that I am going to focus on, will be the personnel of the laying out, as there is good evidence on this subject. Irish source material was provided by the collections of the Irish Folklore Commission³ (IFC). Two questionnaires on death customs from the years 1938 and 1978 as well as interview transcripts and manuscripts of the School Scheme were used.⁴ The main source for Austria consisted of the answer to one question of the "Atlas der deutschen Volkskunde" (ADV). Question 162a asked about the person who did the washing of the dead. Austria participated in the project of the atlas as it was carried out, from 1929 to 1935. Since the results have never been published properly, only the Lower Austrian material was accessible through the dissertation of Huber.

The persons who prepared the corpse for the wake and funeral were the ones that got in closest contact with the dead. Hence traditional concepts of belief and behaviour rules applied to them in the most rigid way. On the other hand practical necessities were also inflicted on them by the process of bodies' decay. All the actions of these persons need therefore to be considered both in terms of religious belief and of practical functionalism. A third dimension

can be added when psychological aspects like that of the "psychology of grief" are included.

THE ROLE OF GENDER

A PREDOMINANCE OF WOMEN

Throughout Europe the laying out of corpses was mostly left to women. Earlier scholarly interpretation tried to explain this fact by the dangers present during the washing of the corpse. Women were thought to be better protected against these dangers.⁵ This belief, if it ever existed, could not have been very popular, since there is no evidence for it to my knowledge. It is therefore much more likely that women were preferred because of the general distrust felt towards possible male sexual behaviour in the presence of naked corpses. Necrophile sexual acts were obviously attributed much more to men than to women. The belief of women being better protected was probably only a secondary explanation for the accustomed tradition.

Also in Ireland the laying out was predominantly carried out by women. Not very often did it happen that one woman was expected to do this heavy work alone⁶. But if this was the case, help was needed at least for heaving the corpse out of the bed and back again after the washing and clothing. Thus, it was most common to get

² Apart from the world-wide context of the Roman Catholic Religion only early Christian mission by Irish monks in southern Germany can be mentioned.

³ Today kept in the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin (UCD).

⁴ The subject of laying out is treated more extensively by Haid (1995).

⁵ HDA, 1114.

⁶ IFC 2106:40 Co.Wicklow/Talbotstown Lower/Blessington 1978; IFC 2106:136 Co.Armagh/Orior Lower/Killeevy 1978; IFC 2107:42 Co.Donegal/Inishowen East/Clonmany 1978

two⁷ or three⁸ women for the laying out. Normally one of these women was more experienced in the work and the others assisted her.

The fact, that a woman did the laying out, fitted ideally to the custom of the "washing"-day. In some parts of Ireland it was common to get the same woman who washed the corpse to be responsible for the removal of the remains of the wake.⁹ Here it was believed that a person who did something had to undo it again. Often these women didn't have the time to help or to stay all the day long. Nevertheless their presence at the "washing" was believed to be indispensable even if they put their hands only once in the washing tub.¹⁰

MEN LAYING OUT MEN

Even though the laying out was usually attributed to women, men have never been totally excluded from it. The laying out in Ireland was mostly performed by women. Nevertheless some geographical areas can be identified where the laying out was completely dominated by men, even if these cases remained

⁷ IFC 548:114/5 Co.Wexford/Shelmaliere West/Ballylannan 1938; IFC 2105:22/3 Co.Kerry/Clanmaurice/Duagh 1978; IFC 2107:97 Co.Galway/Clare/Annaghdown 1978

⁸ IFC 548:114/5 Co.Wexford/Shelmaliere West/Ballylannan 1938; IFC 552:303 Galway/Ballymoe/Drumatemple/Ballymoe 1938; IFC 2105:67 Co.Clare / Corcomroe / Kilmacrehy / Liscannor 1978; IFC 2107:104 Co.Galway / Kilconnell / Ahascragh 1978

⁹ IFC 2106:63 Co.Kildare/Kilkea&Moone/Moone/Moone 1978; IFC 2107:101 Co.Galway/Clare/Annaghdown 1978

¹⁰ IFC 1797:330 Co.Mayo/Carra/Turlough/Park 1972

isolated. In such districts corpses of both sexes were laid out by the same man¹¹.

More common was the custom to divide the sexes in order to secure that male corpses were laid out by men and female corpses by women.¹² Because of their supposed strength, men were believed to be able to do the job without assistance. There are examples, though, where two men laid out a male corpse.¹³ In contrast to that men were sometimes thought to be in need of female assistance because of their lack of knowledge concerning rules and devices. The following statement of a Kerry man shows that in this area men were asked to do the work only in exceptional cases and that these had to be told what to do:

Rarely was it a man's job, except for some unanodable reason. I remember once when I was 16 helping a man to do it. A woman looked in now and again while we were working. She could do nothing. She was taken up in the bones, but she gave us some useful advice. Ever after I could do the whole thing reasonably

¹¹ IFC 1834:152-154 Co. Roscommon Co.Roscommon/Athlone/Drum/Newtown; IFC 1834:203 Co.Roscommon/Athlone/Drum/Newtown 1974; IFC 2105:178 a Co.Tipperary/Ormond Upper/Templederry 1978; IFC 2107:35 Co.Donegal/Tirhugh/Drumhome 1978; IFC 2107:46 Co.Donegal/Kilmacrenan/Tullyfern 1978

¹² IFC 551:421 Co.Clare/Bunratty Upper/Inchicronan/Drumsallagh 1938; IFC 1431:118 Co.Donegal / Banagh/Inver/Letterbarrow 1955; IFC 2105:19 Co.Kerry/Clanmaurice/Ballyheige 1978; IFC 2106:11 Co.Meath/Duleek Upper/Ardcath 1978; IFC 2107:8 Co.Donegal/Boylagh/Templecrone/Roshin 1978; IFC 2107:19 Co.Donegal/Kilmacrenan/Gortnacor 1978; IFC 2107:131 Co.Leitrim/Drumahaire/Carrik on Shannon 1978; IFC 2107:166 Co.Roscommon/Ballintober South/Kilbride 1978

¹³ IFC 2105:58 Co.Kerry/Iraghticonnor/Killehenry/Ballybunnion 1978

well by myself if I had to, but the occasion never came about again.¹⁴

It is quite clear that men have participated at the laying out of male corpses at all times. Since these corpses had to be shaved, a man was got in order to perform the shaving. It was a very delicate task because the corpse's face should not be damaged. This is why only very skilful men¹⁵ were allowed to do the shaving and often the local barber¹⁶ was called.

In Austria male personnel for the laying out can only be deduced from the profession specified in the ADV-collection. Especially gravediggers were popular corpse washers (Huber 1981:48, Fig. IV). The custom of gender correspondence between corpse and the persons involved in the laying out was common in Austria as well (Rieser 1991:104). Therefore, there must have been a high number of unprofessional men engaged in the laying out.

LAYING OUT AS A SERVICE OF GRIEF

RELATIVES PERFORMING THE LAYING OUT

Considering Irish sources, relatives were only in very rare cases allowed to do the laying out.¹⁷

¹⁴ IFC 2105:54-56 Co.Kerry/Iraghticonnor/Killehenry/Ballybunnion 1978

¹⁵ IFC 548:114/5 Co.Wexford/Shelmaliere West/Ballylannan 1938

¹⁶ IFC 2105:143 Co.Limerick/Coshlea/Kilfinnane/Kilfinnane 1978

¹⁷ IFC 2105:17 Co.Kerry/Iraghticonnor/Killehenry 1978; IFC 2105:33 Co.Kerry/Clanmaurice/Ardfert 1978; IFC 2105:204 Co.Tipperary/Iffa&Offa East/St.Marys/Clonmel 1978; IFC 2106:4 Co.Dublin/Dublin City 1978; IFC 2106:146/7 Co.Cavan/Tullyhaw/Killinagh 1978; IFC 2107:136 Co.Leitrim/Drumahaire/Killanummery 1978

Sometimes they acted as helpers for the washing, assisting a more experienced person.

Austrian ethnographic literature believed in relatives being excluded from corpse arrangement. But the results from the ADV-questionnaire show that there were some cases. Since household members, relatives, and friends were gathered to one category for the evaluation, we only know that in 16% of the cases such closely related and associated persons did the laying out (Huber 1981:48).

In German tradition even some examples of strict prohibitions for relatives to participate in the laying out were handed down.¹⁸ There is as well a psychological interpretation for this fact. When Erich Lindemann (1965:190) first called public attention of the symptomatology of grief in 1944 one of the symptoms he described was:

One of the big obstacles to this work [grief work] seems to be the fact that many patients try to avoid the intense distress connected with the grief experienced and to avoid the expression of emotion necessary for it.

This might explain the fact that relatives were often very active in the household for funeral preparation or outside the house for shopping or noticing the death. Such short and diversified work were normally accepted very happily by the members of the family because they could avoid the momentary pain of grief. It is clear that these relatives would have refused the work of laying out the corpse since they would have been constantly confronted with the image of the dead.

¹⁸ HDA, 1114.

NEIGHBOURS CALLED ON FOR HANDLING THE CORPSE

Neighbours seem to have been the most important workers during the time of funeral preparation. While relatives were supposed to recover from death agony or to rest in their grief, neighbours were highly active throughout the house.

In Ireland neighbours¹⁹ were the most frequent persons engaged in the laying out, especially in thinly populated areas. Often this responsibility had been assigned even before death occurred. The dying person would have mentioned the woman/man of his/her choice.²⁰ It could well happen that in some areas neighbours participated in the laying out to such a degree, that nearly every woman was involved.²¹ Also friends of the deceased or friends of the family could possibly be asked to do the work.²²

Whoever was to lay out the corpse had to have a basic knowledge of rules to obey and of

¹⁹ IFC 548:114/5 Co.Wexford/Shelmaliere West/Ballylannan 1938; IFC 2105:17 Co.Kerry/Iraghticonnor/Killeheny 1978; IFC 2105:74 Co.Clare/Corcomroe/Kilmanaheen/Ennistimon 1978; IFC 2105:87/88 Co. Cork/Muskerry East/Inishcarra/Kilmurry 1978; IFC 2105:186 Co.Tipperary/Ormond Upper/Aghnameadle/Toomyvara 1978; IFC 2106:66 Co.Wexford/Shelburne/Owenduff/Garryduff 1978; IFC 2106:72 Co.Wexford/Bantry/Killegney/Ballyboro 1978; IFC 2106:103 Co.Longford/Rathcline/Cashel 1978; IFC 2107:3 Co.Donegal/Raphoe/Kilteevege 1978; IFC 2074:240 Co.Tyrone/Dungannon Upper/Lissan 1978

²⁰ IFC 2105:38 Co.Kerry/Clanmaurice/Killury/Causeway 1978

²¹ IFC 2106:80 Co.Wexford/Bargy/Kilmore 1978

²² IFC 555:415 Co.Leitrim/Mohill/Mohill 1938; IFC 2105:8 Co.Kerry/Corkaguiny/Kilmalkedar/Carrig 1978; IFC 2105:125 Co.Limerick/Glenquin/Newcastle 1978; IFC 2106:7 Co.Dublin/Coolock/Glasnevin 1978; IFC 2106:40 Co.Wicklow/Talbotstown Lower/Blessington 1978

the tasks to fulfil. For that reason only persons with practice were allowed to do the job. These could be viewed as unprofessional specialists of the rural community. Often inexperienced persons assisted these "specialists" not being distracted by other work.

The situation in Austria was very similar. Neighbours were not only expected to lend out different utensils, but also to take an active part in the laying out, the wake, and the funeral (Staffler 1956:422). Here again neighbours were the most common corpse washers. Especially in scattered settlements this was understood to be a neighbourly obligation (Huber 1981:48). Often two neighbours of the same sex as the deceased did the laying out.²³ It was also quite common among women to nominate during their lifetime a certain female neighbour, who was usually also a close friend.²⁴

PROFESSIONALISTS OF CORPSES

THE PROFESSION OF THE "SOUL NUNS"

A distinction has to be made between urbanised centres and areas of lesser population density. There is plentiful evidence for the Middle-European area that a different kind of mortuary specialisation developed in medieval cities. Apart from the widespread profession of gravediggers, also semi-monastic organised groups of women and men took part in the funeral

²³ ADV 162a: Lower Austria/Neunkirchen/Trattenbach

²⁴ ADV 162a: Lower Austria/Lilienfeld/Türnitz; Huber: Lower Austria/Amstetten/Haidershofen; Huber: Lower Austria/Amstetten/Behamber

preparations. These lay communities were only established in the more important centres and female assemblies were more common than male. The Middle-Latin name "Beguinae" (German "Begine") applied to female members, the name "Beguinus" (German "Begarde") to male members. Following the widow's dress Begines adopted the white veil as symbol of their state and profession. Since their ecclesiastical state was defined as an inter mediation between clergy and lay confraternities, their approach to illness and death was religious as well as commercial. This was one of the main criteria why Begines and Begardes cannot be equated with the later profession of community nurses (Illi 1992:69). Even though Begines and Begardes were medieval specialists in nursing and were allowed as well to exercise their profession by house visitations, their religious importance was evidenced by the sources citing aspects of Begine's handling of liturgical utensils and Begine's praying for the soul of the dead.

Their professional competence did not finish with the funeral. Begines attended the funeral and played sometimes even an active role in it as for instance by carrying candles or the coffin. The payment occurred often at the gate of the graveyard after the funeral (Illi 1992:73-74). They took also care of the grave's maintenance and prayed at the graveside for the soul of their sponsors. Thus, it can't be surprising that Begine's houses were found close to the cemetery, or within the cemetery area.

Even though Begines and Begardes were mentioned in several medieval source categories, many aspects of their occupation are still unknown. It is clear that they prepared the dead for the funeral. They were often mentioned for

wrapping the corpse in the shroud and sewing it up (Schilling 1887:84). Nevertheless there is no evidence for any other activity of corpse preparation such as washing, shaving or clothing.

THE "HANDY WOMEN"

The familiarity with Begine's activities was certainly one of the reasons why female corpse professionals in later times were often called "soul nuns" (German "Seelnonne") (Sepp 1891:131) or "soul sisters" (German "Seelschwester") (Baader 1851:111).

Such women were also addressed with names like the "preserving woman" (German "Einmacherin") (Sepp 1891:131) or "corpse woman" (German "Leichenfrau")²⁵ The latter expression entered scientific terminology. In western Austria they also were called "corpse sewing woman" (German "Leichennaherin") (Hörmann 1909:425) or "dressing up woman" (German "Aufputzerin") (Wallnöfer 1954:296).

In Ireland the term "handy woman" was the most common. Though this term could be applied also to unprofessional experienced women²⁶, it

²⁵ HDA, 1068.

²⁶ IFC 2105: 181 Co.Tipperary/Middlethird/St.Johnstown/St.Johnstown 1978; IFC 2105: 80 Co.Cork/Fermoy/Mallow 1978; IFC 2105: 98 Co.Cork/Bantry/Kilmocomoge 1978; IFC 2105: 108 Co.Cork/Carbery West/Dromdaleague/Derrynagree 1978; IFC 2105: 121 Co.Cork/Carbery West/Dromdaleague 1978; IFC 2105: 173 Co.Tipperary/Iffa&Offa West/Caher/Ballymacadam 1978; IFC 2105: 197Co.Tipperary/Slievardagh/Buolick/Bawnreagh 1978; IFC 2106: 28 Co.Kilkenny/Gowran/Rathcoole/Johnswell 1978; IFC 2106: 36a / 36b Co.Kilkenny/Gowran/Dunbell/Dunbell 1978; IFC 2107: 24a Co.Donegal/Kilmacrenan/Clondavaddog 1978; IFC 2107: 153/4 Co.Mayo/Tirawley/Ballynahaglish/Ballyderg 1978

applied in most cases to the commercial specialists. The name "handy woman" probably alludes to the fact that these same women were often also engaged in midwifery. In fact the laying out of corpses was in later times often one of the jobs of the local midwives.²⁷ On this point the source material was not clear enough to decide in many cases whether the mentioned midwives were publicly paid midwives or "handy women". The same problem appeared where nurses²⁸ were stated to have done the laying out. The normal procedure was, however, that these "professionals"²⁹ charged money for their services. In most cases the charge depended considerably on the standing of the family.³⁰ The "handy woman" tried to live on the basis of this activity. A statement from County Kilkenny mentioned the use of a sign for such trade in order to advertise the service. The sign in this case was a white cross fixed to the side of the house where this woman lived.³¹ Obviously

²⁷ IFC 581: 308 Co.Longford/Granard/Killoe/Drumhalry 1938; IFC 2105: 3 Co.Kerry/Dunkerron North/Knockane/Beaufort 1978; IFC 2105: 30 Co.Kerry/Clanmaurice/Killlury/Dromnacarra 1978; IFC 2105: 61 Co.Kerry/CorkaguinyKilgobban/Camp 1978; IFC 2106: 15 Co.Dublin/Uppercross/Clondalkin/Ronanstown 1978; IFC 2106: 129 Co.Antrim/Kilconway/Rasherkin 1978; IFC 2107: 110 Co.Galway/Kilconnell/Kilconnell 1978

²⁸ IFC 2105: 8 Co.Kerry/Corkaguiny/Kilmalkedar/Carrig 1978; IFC 2105: 67 Co.Clare/Corcomroe/Kilmacrehy/Liscannor 1978; IFC 2105: 173 Co.Tipperary/Iffa&Offa West/Caher/Ballymacadam 1978; IFC 2105: 186 Co.Tipperary/Ormond Upper/Aghnameadle/Toomyvara 1978; IFC 2106: 40 Co.Wicklow/Talbotstown Lower/Blessington 1978; IFC 2107: 24a Co.Donegal/Kilmacrenan/Clondavaddog 1978; IFC 2107: 54 Co.Donegal/Kilmacnenan/Letterkenny 1978

²⁹ IFC 2105: 131/2 Co.Limerick/Glenquin/Monagay/Doonakenna 1978

³⁰ IFC 2106: 47 Co.Westmeath/Clonlonan/Kilcleagh/Moate 1978

³¹ IFC 2106: 21 Co.Kilkenny/Gowran/Inistioge/Cappagh 1978

these persons belonged to the poor of rural society. The modest income was only one aspect of their low social status.

In Austria "professionals" existed under the condition of an official designation by the rural commune. Usually older and needy persons of the area were given the opportunity to earn some money through this service (Huber 1981:48). The results of the ADV-questionnaire fit very well in this picture: "a day-labourer"³², "the blind beadle"³³, "a poor resident"³⁴, "the oldest inhabitant of the village"³⁵. In most cases, however, old, unmarried, or widowed women were assigned for the job. In parts of western Austria these women were entrusted with the wake during the daytime. If death occurred in a wealthy household, the "handy woman" was authorised to hand out some bread and salt to very needy mourners (Wallnöfer 1954:296). She was sometimes also sent out in order to spread the news of the death (Hörmann 1909:425). The fact that these women were nearly everywhere invited with other helpers to participate at the funeral repast (Zender 1964:591) can be valued as a social act.

COFFIN-JOINER, GRAVEDIGGER AND BARBER

In some villages other personnel took over the laying out for commercial purposes. These

³² ADV 162a: Lower Austria/Waidhifen a.d.Thaya/Reibers

³³ ADV 162a: Lower Austria/Mistelbach/Ungerndorf

³⁴ ADV 162a: Lower Austria/Mistelbach/Aspam a.d.Zaya Lower Austria/Melk/Weiten

³⁵ ADV 162a: Lower Austria/Krems/Emmersdorf; Lower Austria/St.Pölten/Aspernhofen; Lower Austria/Neunkirchen/Potschach

were usually professionals, who were already connected with the sphere of death rituals, as they participated in funeral preparation. The laying out was hence seen as a part of their service.

In Austria the laying out was very frequently carried out by gravediggers. In the area of Lower Austria their role in corpse arrangement seems to have been much more important than that of the "handy woman". Coffin-joiners³⁶, though, figured in the ADV-questionnaire only in rare occasions (Huber 1981:48, Fig. IV). The laying out was sometimes committed to the care of the gravedigger's wife meeting the requirements of moral integrity, sex correspondence (in case of female corpses) and commercial profit.

In Ireland the "handy woman" seems to have played a very predominant role among professionals. Only in a few cases the local barber was asked to do the shaving and washing of the corpse.³⁷

A social taboo was attached to gravediggers and barbers in traditional rural society throughout Europe. In the case of the gravediggers as well as in that of the "handy women" the profession was considered to be "dishonest" (Danckert 1963:50-53). The reason for this can partly be found in the "revolting" character of their activity, partly in the superstitious taboo attached to death and the soul.

³⁶ Huber: Lower Austria/Amstetten/St. Michael; Huber: Lower Austria/Baden/Klausenleopoldsdorf; Huber: Lower Austria/Wiener Neustadt/Krumbach -

³⁷ IFC 2105: 143 Co.Limerick/Coshlea/Kilfinnane/Kilfinnane 1978

CONCLUSION

The service of corpse arrangement for wake and burial could be carried out by private persons as well as by professionals. The latter were more frequent in areas with higher population density. Many parts of pre-industrialised Europe relied on neighbours or friends as the most important persons for corpse preparation. The commercial use of this service seem to have developed from medieval lay communities that specialised in death rituals and from additional assignments for civic trades like gravediggers, barbers and joiners. Women were the most common corpse specialists, while men played a minor, though not indispensable role. A comparison between Ireland and Austria showed not only very similar superstition traditions, but also similar strategies of handling the same difficulties.

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