

# Reformation materialized – 16<sup>th</sup>-century Danish graveslabs as an expression of changes in mentality

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## Introduction

In the year 1536 the Protestant duke Christian III succeeded in gaining control over Denmark. With an army of mercenaries on one side and a financial crisis of the Danish state on the other, Christian III chose a radical way and decided to confiscate all church-property. All the bishops were imprisoned and succeeded by Protestant superintendents. From this time on the Catholic faith was forbidden (Göbell 1982). The date has served as a theoretical breakpoint between the Catholic period and the Protestant era. The events themselves – the radical decision of the King and the establishment of Protestantism – are very well documented in contemporary literary sources and images. The work has been carried out by historians and art-historians (Andrén 1999; Honnens de Lichtenberg 1989), but archaeological investigations have not been emphasised or appreciated. The aim of this study is therefore to demonstrate that there is a broad field of data waiting to be investigated, which could be combined and compared with the written sources and images. Even if we believe that we have a sound knowledge of the age of Reformation we have to admit that there is almost nothing known about 16th-century people's individual religious decisions, regional differences in belief and endeavours of identity in a world of common Christian symbols. The main question is, whether material culture even reflects differences between people with a Catholic or Protestant belief.

The focus of this article is to find out how the different symbols and 'languages' worked by investigating 16th-century graveslabs and tombstones. This form of material culture is quite frequently represented in almost all churches and

provides us with exact datings concerning the production of the artefact and the social rank of the individual commemorated. Even if material culture within the religious sphere has a tendency to be conservative, a change in the art and in the use of symbols can be observed. The 16th-century graveslabs belong to a category of items which combine the elements of text, image and shape. These three elements cannot be understood as identical semantic signs, they have their own legitimacy and must be decrypted in different ways. The graveslab is a mediator between death and life, it tells us when the person died, gives hints on their social status and even on economic wealth. The dead is a socially and culturally constructed unit (Staecker 1999).

At the same time the grave-monument is not an accidental product of a craftsman without any reflection of its time. On the contrary, the choice of language, style, mottos, motives, attributes, positions and costumes are highly influenced by their context, time and lifestyle. The way of thinking of both the client and the craftsman reflect the mental and physical lifestyle of 16th-century society. The client is consciously making a choice of how the monument of the dead is supposed to be presented. By doing so, the monument is a continuation of the lifestyle from the world of the living to the dead. Its purpose is to demonstrate the lifestyle of the deceased. It is part of a code which in the sense of semiotics is only readable for the sender and the receiver.

## Analysis

The point of departure is to look at the material culture as part of a process, for example a



burial-place with graves from a limited period of time. The original number of 16th-century graveslabs in medieval Denmark is hard to estimate, but we must take into account heavy losses in some regions because of 17th–18th centuries burials, spatial changes in the Baroque period and ‘purging’ with the restoration-wave of the 19th-century. It would be wrong to postulate that most of the Catholic period graveslabs disappeared immediately after the Reformation; on the contrary, the losses in the medieval material appeared to have happened from the 17th-century onwards (Kloos 1980, 37 f.). There are more than 900 graveslabs preserved from the period 1470–1600, with a clear distinction of documented graveslabs produced before and after 1540/50. While the former are regarded as worth documenting both in text and image, the latter are often only mentioned without more detailed information. This is founded on the fact that the style of the inscriptions changes during the above mentioned period and indicates that the post-medieval period is not regarded as worthy of further investigation.

In spite of the different state of documentation and preservation a material of 526 illustrated graveslabs could be collected. Among these 313 graveslabs are perfectly documented in text, while the other 213 provide us with sufficient information for analysis (Jensen 1951, 53). The graveslabs belonged to the higher social classes, as this kind of monument was not erected over a lower social class. We also have to take into account the fact that the middle class – the burghers – were only to a certain degree represented by graveslabs while most of them were buried on a churchyard. Therefore only three social classes will be differentiated here: a. the clerics (bishop, abbot, priest), b. the nobility (knights), c. the burghers/third class (mayor, councillor, crafts- and tradesmen).

## Language and Letters

An examination on the choice of language since 1470 is pertinent. At this time the use of Latin and the vernacular, in this case Danish, can be observed. There is a clear distinction between the different classes. While the clerics predominantly used Latin over the whole 16th-century, with some single examples from the 1550s onwards, the vernacular dominates

among the nobility and the burghers. Danish emerges for the first time about 1500 and gains popularity from the 1520s onwards when it dominates the language totally. Latin is represented over the whole 16th-century, but without gaining importance. The use of differing lettering styles merits the second part of the investigation. In the early 16th-century gothic dominates. Its immediate successor is the fracture-style, which is quite similar. The fracture-style was introduced by priests around 1500 and after 1530 by the nobility and the burghers. However another style was becoming extremely popular among these classes: capital letters. The capitalis was introduced around 1520 and became the most frequently used inscription of the nobility about ten years later. The use of the new type of lettering is almost the same among the burghers – even the fracture-style is quite popular, but it did not dominate the lettering of the clerics before the end of the 16th-century. This ‘conservatism’ of the priests both concerning the language and the lettering could even be observed in the medieval period in Scandinavia (Staecker 1999, 245 f.). It is obvious that the use of Latin and the Gothic letters was part of an identity which was mainly based on a tradition of reading and preaching Latin and of writing manuscripts in a traditional way. A similar result is observed in Schleswig-Holstein by K. Krüger (1999, 96 ff.). Here the change of language and letters takes place a bit earlier, but it is the same pattern from a perspective of time and social status.

The use of the vernacular and capital letters, as seen most clearly among the nobility, is – as demonstrated – not a result of the change of confession. On the contrary, the introduction of these new elements started already around the year 1500 AD. In the case of Denmark we could state that this introduction has a connection with the newly introduced humanism. In this sense the introduction of the vernacular and of the capital letters reflect a preparation of the ground for a change in mentality, but it is not evidence in itself.

## The image of clerics

Looking for the evidence of the Reformation, we have to examine other factors on the graveslabs which could provide us with more



detailed information. One important group here are the clerics. Is there any change in the attributes (dress, symbols, position) which enables us to detect evidence for the Reformation? A list of all images of priests from 1470 AD onwards demonstrates that there is no simple solution. The typical dress of a Catholic priest did not disappear after 1536, on the contrary, we can find it until 1599. A similar pattern emerges with the bishops' crozier, which can be identified until 1556 and then again in 1599. Elements like the mitre, the rosary and the blessing-gesture do, however, confirm the historical event of the Reformation, there are only two exceptions existing after 1536. An indication of a Protestant attitude can be found in the introduction of a burgher-dress since 1546. Even attributes like holding the handgloves or a sword and a praying position are new and appear for the first time after 1539. More difficult to interpret is the attribute book, which appears both on Catholic and Protestant motifs. The crucial difference here is, whether the cleric is holding or reading the book. While the latter can be associated with Lutheran priests, the former can even be found in a context before 1536. Finally we can state that the iconographical concept of the graveslabs raised in memory of priests indicate a change of confession. This is confirmed in the first phase by an absence of typical Catholic attributes and in the second phase by the introduction of a new image.

## Elements of Protestantism

The other possibility of examining religious change is to investigate the innovative introduction of both epigraphical and iconographical elements on the graveslabs of the clerics, nobility and burghers. Several factors are unknown before the historical date of Reformation, these are: a. the image of Christ or the mentioning of the Lord, b. the image of the resurrection or its mention (vernacular: *engledelig opstandelse*), c. mentioning the 'true religion' (Latin: *doctrina sana*), d. finishing the sentence with 'whose soul God may have' (vernacular: *hvis siel Gud haver*), e. mentioning the adjective 'godfearing' (vernacular: *gudsfructig*), f. quotes from the bible, g. finishing the sentence with 'passed away in the Lord' (vernacular: *hedensovede i herren*). The

statistics of these factors demonstrates clearly the massive impact of new iconographic and epigraphic elements after 1530 AD. There are multiple reasons for this introduction. Instead of an adoration of saints, as known from the Catholic period, the prayers are now directed towards the Lord. The belief that Christ is a direct mediator, becomes clearer when analysing the graveslabs with a motif of resurrection. The resurrection plays the most important role both in image and text. The Protestant belief in the hereafter expresses here a kind of hope which is unknown from the Catholic period. The barriers which made it impossible to show this optimistic view of a further destiny have now disappeared and are replaced by the individual belief. At the same time the adjective 'godfearing' and the appositive 'whose soul God may have' are manifesting a new form of religious attitude which has not been phrased in this way before. There is even a new element with 'passed away in the Lord', which demonstrates the belief in a peaceful death without the Catholic scenario of a struggle between good and evil. The use of a new epigraphical and iconographical language indicates hereby the conscious process of change. The post-reformation individual is applying a different code by introducing different elements which express his new belief.

## An indirect Protestant attitude

After the analyses of Lutheran symbolism I will turn to a more difficult subject, the question of an indirect Protestant attitude. The point of departure is, whether the depiction of the nobility and the burghers differs from the Catholic period and whether the composition of the graveslabs differs from the traditional style. It must be stressed here, that comparative material from the 16th-century Catholic-ruled areas has not been investigated yet. Certain phenomena may be a consequence of the Renaissance and not of a change of religion. If we look first at the depiction of men and women on the Danish graveslabs, we can note an obvious change in the position of arms. Among the women we can differentiate between: 1. a position of open arms, 2. a praying position, 3. folded hands, 4. arms crossed over the chest, 5. hands holding the fabric of the clothes. While the open position of the arms domi-



nates from the 1470s onwards, a change can be observed from the 1540s, where the arms crossed over the chest dominate totally the depiction of females. The other factors – folded hands and hands holding the fabric – are also represented from the 1540s, but the latter position is dominant among the burgher women in the 1580s. The praying position is already noticeable during the early 16th-century, but the more frontal arranged position first becomes popular from the 1540s. This depiction of women in a very controlled position after the Reformation could perhaps be connected with the new Protestant ideal of women.

The depiction of men is much more conservative. The nobility follows almost an archetype with the image of the knight and his standard-weapon the sword. A praying-position is apparent from the 1550s onwards, but never becomes as popular as the dominating archetype. Another neutral image is the depiction of heraldic symbols instead of individuals. This type is popular until the 1540s, but then more or less disappears. Among the burghers this neutral type dominates the whole 16th-century, while other types of depiction like upright standing individuals in a burgher-dress or the praying position are not as popular.

## Composition

The composition of the graveslabs indicates similar tendencies. We can differentiate between: a. a frame of text and heraldic symbols, b. a frame of text and figures, c. figure-stones in connection with a text-tabula, d. a text-tabula. An analysis shows us that the first two types are most popular during the first half of the 16th-century. There is an obvious change from the 1540s onwards, where the latter types become more frequent. The nobility almost exclusively uses the figure-stone in connection with the text-tabula, while the burghers also use the text-tabula to almost the same degree. This type also gains popularity among the clerics, where it dominates from the 1570s onwards. It becomes clear that this relation of certain types to different classes must be connected with their endeavour to provide the observer with specific information. The clerics and some of the burghers – often those well-educated – use the text as a mediator like a prayer, while the nobility is still obsessed with

an archaic archetype of a heavily armed knight, but in connection with a text-tabula, which in itself makes it possible to transfer quite often a long list of relationships. It becomes clear, that the use of text is used as an instrument to transfer as much information as possible to the world of the living. The popularity of the text-tabula among the clerics and the burghers, might hereby reflect a kind of iconoclasm by its exclusion of any image.

In a final analysis the relationship between graveslabs with a Protestant text or image and graveslabs without any hint towards a religious identity was investigated. As we have already stated, the first attributes are introduced almost at the same time as the historically known event. Among the clerics, nobility and the burghers the graveslabs with attributes start to dominate from the 1550s onwards. But we have to take into account that the graveslabs without motifs do not disappear, on the contrary, they remain conspicuous until the end of the 16th-century. This fact might reflect a long process in the change of confession, where a kind of 'silent resistance' took place in the shape of a neutralisation.

## Conclusion

The Danish 16th-century graveslabs tell us much more about a change of confession than we have previously believed. The endeavour of Protestant society to demonstrate their new lifestyle in text and image has become clear. By doing so, the attitude of the living is even transferred to the monuments of the dead. Attributes, mottos, gestures, symbols and the intensive use of text mirror the changed perspective on objects. At the same time the material culture reflects a slow period of transition, where traditional Catholic elements survive long after the official date 1536. A more obvious change takes place from the 1550s onwards, this is almost one generation after the Reformation. The argument is close at hand: the older generation, which grew up during the period of Catholic belief, did not change its language and images on their monuments which were of great importance for the concept of the hereafter. The change first took place with a new generation which had accepted the new confession and made it a part of their identity.



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