The children of Assistens Cemetery

The process of analyzing the archaeological and osteological results from Assistens cemetery is only in its starting phase, but the things we already can see, evoke thoughts which we want to pursue and highlight phenomena we want to learn more about. The life and care of children is one of them.

About 13% of the investigated graves on Assistens cemetery are children’s graves (0-17 years of age). We know that child mortality was high as far as into the 20th century, so the figures are what one could expect. For us today, it is strange and deeply tragic when a child dies, and the figure of 13% can therefore feel shocking. For the Copenhageners of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, it was not strange and unexpected for a child to die, but most likely, it was as utterly tragic as it is today. Earlier, scientists put forward theories and conceptions about children’s’ lives in former times not being of such high value. The reason for this would be that nobody knew how long the children would live and if they would survive childhood. More recent archaeological research on cemeteries show a more nuanced picture and likewise ethnological evidence concerning this time period support the idea of children often being highly valued and playing an important role in the family. That they were partly treated differently than adults in death is, however, something that can be seen in archaeological evidence, as well as within ethnoology and anthropology. This can be seen also on Assistens Cemetery, as will be shown in this text.

Where do we find the children’s graves?

Many children were found buried in family graves the same way as adults. Newborn children were sometimes found together with an adult, most likely the mother. Some children, though, were buried in other ways. We found a row of graves, consisting only of children, and placed between family graves. In written accounts of grave types, this phenomenon is called children’s grave plots or a children’s row (“børnelinje”), and it was to be placed in the plant area between two rows of family graves, just like the one found on Assistens Cemetery. We have also found a couple of small groups of children’s graves outside known plots – this is something we have not found mentioned in written sources. Another interesting observation made is that family graves containing children were not evenly spread out over the excavated area. The area south of the grave digger’s house is a good example of this (see plan below). The graves closest to the buildings, or actually under the south building, as shown on the plan, are the ones where children were found together with adults. These graves are believed to belong to older plots, which were abandoned when more buildings were added to the north one. The graves further south do not contain any children. Instead there is the children’s line in the bushes in the bottom right of the plan.

The different placements of children’s graves raise many questions. Was it poor children who lay outside the plots? Are there more children buried in older family plots than newer, and in that case, why? Why was there a special row for children, and for which children? Was it for practical reasons, because the size of a child’s coffin did not fit into the calculated size for normal coffins in a family plot? On the other hand, plenty of children were placed in family plots. One suggestion is that it could have been children of people recently moved to Copenhagen who were put in the children’s rows – maybe with the intention of moving the child when a family grave plot later was bought. For both child- and adult graves there are notes in burial protocols of graves being moved from one place on the cemetery to another. Another thought concerning the children’s row, and also for the other group of graves outside plots, is that they could be foster children or children from a poor house. Foster children are mentioned in the church books, and singled out from children who lived with their parents. We do not yet know where foster children were buried, with their foster families, biological families or somewhere else? In the proceeding analysis of the graves it will be of high interest to compare the differently placed graves. Are there differences in health? What about age spread, and is it possible to see differences in the graves, for example when it comes to coffins and objects put in the coffins? And are there differences between early and
later graves? What can be said about the view of childhood and the treatment of children from the children’s graves on Assistens cemetery?

This picture shows a section/segment of a map from 1960 with the excavated areas and with all skeletons which were surveyed with a total station and marked as lines. North is upwards. The area within the red line represents the station pit for the metro, and it also marks the area excavated below 1 m depth and hence where the absolute majority of graves were found. The yellow lines represent child skeletons and the blue are the adults. The map is not completely correctly rectified; it should be shifted slightly towards southeast. When doing so, it is clear that the children’s row mentioned in the text is placed in the plant area between plots in the lower right of the map. In the upper right of the map the two groups of children’s graves placed outside known plots can be seen. Additionally, in the area south of the grave digger’s house one can also detect several rows of graves which are not represented on the map, but are remains of an older layout of graves. In this area a lot of children’s graves were found.
What did the graves look like?

Unfortunately many children’s graves are poorly preserved, so information about their health and burial practice is often scarce. Poor preservation is partly due to the children sometimes being buried on a shallower depth than adults, and partly due to the coffin being of thinner wood than adult coffins. In addition, a child’s skeleton is more fragile than an adult’s. In spite of these factors, we have several examples of coffins decorated with plaster details. They have partly decayed so the motif has not been possible to discern, but from adult graves we have examples of angels and plants, so something similar is plausible. We also have some touching examples of children who were buried with toys. One child was buried with a porcelain doll and another child was accompanied by a small red ball in the grave. These toys have now been reburied with the children, like all personal possessions found at this excavation. In general, there is not much preserved when it comes to gifts and decorations. From written material there is evidence that in the 19th century it was common to make paper decorations in gold and bright colours to place on the coffins. This is a true example of the dilemma of archaeology, the fact that we have to base our interpretations of history on the materials which survive.

The surviving parts of a doll found in a child’s grave.

What did the children die from?

From the 101 children who were age assessed, 49 were under 1 year old, 31 children were 1-6 years old, 11 children were 7-11 years old, and 10 were 12-17 years old. This is an expected age spread, since it was the first six years which were crucial for a child’s survival. The osteological analysis of possible causes of death is yet not finished, but preliminary observations show, not surprisingly, that some children suffered from vitamin deficiencies and metabolic diseases. It should also be mentioned, that most diseases can not be seen on the skeleton. Especially if the individual was weak, he or she died before the disease could be manifested on the bones. To compare with the osteological evidence, we have the view of contemporary medical science, which states cause of death for all individuals buried on the cemetery. In the church books from Trinitatis parish, where the buried individuals had lived, there are entries which tell what the children died from. Common causes of death were "krampeslag" (cramps/convulsions), "tænder" (teething), "tæring"/"brystsyge" (tuberculosis) and "hævelse" (swelling of body/body parts). Notable is that the doctors believed children could die from teething. A modern interpretation of what this could relate to is malnutrition in the transition from a diet consisting of breast milk to regular food. Others think it refers to a fungal disease in the mouth which can occur during the first year of life, and could lead to death.
Children in history

Even though one feels sad to come close to the death of children in an archaeological investigation, it is important to tell of them. Children deserve as much as adults to be spoken about, to have their terms of life noticed and acknowledged. Throughout the past, we still know far less of children’s living conditions as we know of adults and this is something that is true for Prehistory as well as the Middle Ages or the 19th century.