

Six Skeletons in the Shadow of the Garden Wall

A Berlin Medical Doctor under Suspicion

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Abstract: During archaeological fieldwork on the area of the so-called 'Great Jewish Courtyard' five skeletons in situ, an emptied burial pit and a single human bone were uncovered. Finds in the pits as well as the stratigraphy dated the burials to the 2nd half of the 17th century. Osteological and traumatological examinations have been undertaken; marks on the bones indicate that the five dead once lived in poor economic conditions; moreover, two of them died a violent death. Before the building plot for the French Reformed Church was bought by the Parish in 1720, it belonged to the medical Doctor Philipp Sigismund Stosch. Between 1680 and 1690, he was part of the medical staff of the Brandenburg electoral court in Berlin, later move to Küstrin. Nothing is known about any medical-anatomical activities Doctor Stosch might have been involved in Berlin; but the six skeletons found in the backyard of his then residence, shed a rather suspicious light on his work.

Keywords: Berlin, early modern period, medical-anatomical activities in the late 17th century

The Excavations on 'Great Jewish Courtyard' in Berlin

The site of the so called 'Great Jewish Courtyard' is situated in the medieval core of Berlin on the northern river bank of the river Spree, just a few meters away from the Jewish Street (Jüdenstraße) within the triangle of the three medieval Berlin churches, St-Nicolas', St-Mary's and the Grey Friars' church. On one of the main streets the medieval town hall has been excavated due to major works within the last three years.

During the Second World War, most of the historical centre of Berlin was destroyed, even 20 years after the War bigger parts of the inner city stayed un-built. Nowadays Berlin again is a real Boom-town and urban planners had the idea to recreate city patterns of the early 20th century but with modern houses. During this planning process an expert report has been written on the history of this part of the medieval town that put the attention on the 'Great Jewish Courtyard' and its structure. In 2005 Dieter HOFFMANN-AXTHELM who wrote this report published a more extended view about this site telling the readership that he was of the opinion that the 'Great Jewish Courtyard' and its structure had their roots in the 13th century.

He described the courtyard as surrounded by twelve houses extensively and pointed out that in this planned pattern the houses No 9 and 10 stood in an irregular way. As a main thesis in his publication HOFFMANN-AXTHELM (2005, 198 - 202) discussed whether No 9 could have been the Jewish "Schul" (the Synagogue) and House No 10 because of the results of geomagnetic examinations the ritual Jewish bath.

As a result of the excavation undertaken in 2012/2013 it could be proved that the 'Great Jewish Courtyard' was a structure of the middle and second half of the 18th century (GROTHE 2013). The houses had been built more or less one after the other according to the lists of the Berlin Fire Insurance (founded in 1718) and

of course according to archaeological evidence; House No 10 was the first to be built around 1730, House No 9 was the youngest in the 1790ies with different construction phases during the 19th and the early 20th century.

If we take a look back in time into the first half of the Thirty Years' War the cities of Berlin and Cölln lost many of their inhabitants; during the Thirty Years' War warfare happened outside the city walls being renewed from the 1630ies onwards. However, the consequences of war reached the cities, too; catastrophic events like the pest in the 1630ies were brought into town by refugees from the surrounding territory or from soldiers and their families: at the end of the Thirty Years War more than 300 houses of around 850 (counted in the 1610s) were abandoned because of very high contributions that had to be paid to the passing troops of all war parties (FADEN 1927).

In the decades after the Thirty Years' War, this empty houses and areas were available for very little money; however, it took around more than half a century until Berlin became a place to live for the Huguenots from France, for people from Switzerland and the Lower Countries or after 1671 for Jewish families. The first six wealthy families came from Vienna; they were invited by Frederick William, the Great Elector of Brandenburg (FADEN 1927).

During excavation on-site of the Great Jewish Courtyard this evolution could be traced by the finds dating into the 17th century that could be recovered in several backfilling of cess pits that indicate the demolition of houses near the Jewish street; this demolition horizon was on the area where House No. 10 was built in the early 1730ies followed by a shortly existing building with a timbered framework. Rest of a tile stove could be recorded.

At another corner of the ground plot the only medieval stone building in the north eastern part of the excavation area was deconstructed to cut the area into new properties.

But as some patterns stayed unchanged; the garden wall was obviously one of those unchanged structures. Made of massive stone it remained as the boundary like it did since the 14th century. East to this structure we revealed five burials in-situ, one empty burial pit and a sixth burial divided into two parts. The upper part with the legs and hipbones and the right bone was excavated in situ, the second part contained the displaced bones of the rest of the skeleton in a pit found nearby (Fig. 1). All burials were generally west-east orientated.

The documentation of the burials was multifaceted. For the single context recording 3D measurements by total station basis were taken; for special features like the burials photogrammetric images were used in combination with total station measurements. The photos were printed out on-site and were used for the archaeological description with details concerning the wooden rests, the nails for fixing the wooden elements, the backfilling or small finds. The osteological description was made by the help of a "skeleton sheet" containing details like existing or non-existing bone, the bone preservation, position of hands or feet as well as a first estimation of the age of death, the body height and pathological remarks.

The Skeletons – osteological description

Individual 1 was laid outstretched in a wooden coffin that was fixed with six nails. The skeleton is mostly entire, even though the preservation of the bones was not very good. Parts of the scull are lacking, the atloido-occipital joints and the breast bone. The age of death was determined to 48 – 57 years, it was a

mature individual and the gender was according to characteristics on the cranium and the hip male. (e.g. lacking Sulcus präauricularis, narrow Incisura ischiadica major). Osteoarthritis of minor intensity was examined on the left shoulder and at both hip joints but of major intensity on the 9th and 10th thorathic vertebrae. The ossified insertion of the Ligamenta flava going down from the 2nd thorathic to the 2nd lumbar vertebrae might be an indication for hard work with long periods of moving the upper body down- and upwards. Individual 1 suffered as well from a canine tooth that did not erupt from the jaw bone and showed not unusual, formation of tartar, parodontosis as well as enamel hypoplasia which is an irreversible disturbance in the mineralisation of the tooth enamel during childhood. It indicates an unspecific marker for diseases caused by scarcity and infections, in this case at the age of two and three.

Individual 2 was lying outstretched on its back, but the lower legs and feet were erected lying on the burial pit's edge. The dead body of the individual was put into the burial pit without a wooden box or coffin; just a shadow of the soft tissue was visible. It is not unlikely that the dead body was put into a burial shroud because of the position of the arms nearby the main corps. Another shadow at the western edge of the pit indicates that Individual 2 was the second dead body to be laid in this re-used burial pit; it was obvious that the first dead body was put into the pit with more accuracy. The gender was female, the young woman died at the age of 24 - 29 years. Individual 2 was afflicted with a peridental fistula and had small formations of tartar, parodontosis as well as tooth enamel hypoplasia caused by diseases of scarcity and infections at the age of three, four and five. During lifetime she suffered of Osteoarthritis of minor intensity on both shoulder joints, at both hip joints and at the lower ankle joint, an ossified insertion of the Ligamenta flava went down from the 6th to the 12th thorathic vertebrae, which - again - can be regarded as an indication for hard work with long periods of moving the upper body down- and upwards. Around the time of her death, Individual 2 was afflicted by a fracture of the skull base that surely had led to her death.

Individuals 3 and 4 were put in a double wooden box that was made long enough to fit for the elder dead body; a timber frontier divided the box into two compartments. As the other individuals they both were put outstretched into their grave with both their arms beside the main body. Both of them died at a very young age: Individual 3 died at the age of 12 - 13 years, Individual 4 at the age of 18 - 22 years.

The gender of Individual 3 could be determined as male. Light formations of tartar could be recorded as well as enamel hypoplasia at the age of three, four and five. In addition, porosity of the bone hemline on the upper jaw and cribra orbitalia in the bone back of his eyes suspect a case of scurvy.

Individual 4 died at the age of 18 - 22 years, showing tooth enamel hypoplasia at the age of four and five and light formations of tartar like all the other individuals as well. A cause of death could not be determined on the bones, the situation of a double burial with Individual 3 led to the conclusion that they both died at the same time, maybe because of an infectious disease.

Even though there is no secure indication of epigenetic characteristics due to methodology it is not unlikely that the two Individuals were closely related.

Individual 5 was the most uncommon case within this group of burials: When we first uncovered the cask it seemed that it was another child's burial; the wooden coffin measured only 1.66 m in length and 25-35 cm in

width, but the buried individual was an adult of around 1.70 m height. The wooden elements of the coffin were fixed with 15 iron nails, many more than in the other cases.

The individual was lying on his left side; the skull as well was lying on the right side showing a huge burst fractures due to sharp-force injury on the left hand side. Parts of the skeleton were dislocated, this must have happened before the coffin was closed and is surely not a postmortal action. Both clavicles and the sternum are lacking. On the head-cap there was an injury of horizontal sharp-force, on the left tibia diaphysis a triple sharp-force injury with rising intensity could be located.

On the right hip bone teeth impressions and bite marks of carnivores are visible. A discrete cut mark on the same hip bone occurred sometime later. The lesions all occurred around the time of death, when the bones still were elastic or at least partly elastic. One possible scenario could have been that Individual 5 was hanged on a gibbet and most of the traces occurred when the dead body was cut off and fell down to earth (BERZIN & WAHL 2010). The bite marks could indicate that the dead body was lying on the ground during several hours before it was removed from the execution place. The cut marks are possibly traces of a section on the dead body which could as well explain the dislocated and missing bones.

In addition to the perimortal lesions, Individual 5 broke his nose during lifetime and survived a blow from behind by sharp force. The dental status showed tartar and periodontitis, tooth decay and one abscess in the upper jaw as well – as described above - defects in tooth enamel that occurred at the ages of two.

The last individual to be described - Individual 6 - was an incomplete skeleton but partly in-situ. The gender was determined as male; the man died at the age of 44 - 52 years. During lifetime he suffered of osteoarthritis of minor intensity on the left shoulder, of osteoarthritis of medium intensity on the right elbow joint, the right hipbone joint and on both knee joints. He suffered of an adhesion of the 1st and 2nd thoracic vertebrae that led to a demined flexibility of the upper body. Another indication of palaeopathological problems could be recorded by the help of bone appositions of nodular structure on the surface of the ribs; they can be interpreted as traces of chronically pleurisy or pulmonary tuberculosis. Further examination to prove this interpretation could not be conducted as the skull is lacking due to the disturbance of the grave during the 18th century house construction. On his left femur another periostitis could be identified as a possible case of syphilis. Comparable to Individual 5 a perimortal discrete injury of sharp-force could be recorded on the distal end of the right tibia diaphysis. Even though the first two vertebrae were not damaged due to a possible death at the gibbet it is not unlikely that he died a similar death like Individual 5.

What do all individuals have in common? The osteological analysis of the bones indicates that the six dead once lived in poor economic conditions; even more, the tooth enamel hypoplasia that could be recorded at least two times on the teeth of every individual show clearly that all individuals even grew up in poor conditions with periods of disease and/or hunger. Moreover, at least two, likely three of them died a violent death; the other three skeletons did not show any traces of violence, the questions concerning the cause of death must stay unanswered.

The Historical Background

Due to the fact that the French Parish Church (consecrated in 1726) was situated only a few meters outside the excavation ground, it seemed likely that the dead once belonged to the French Reformed Parish. But a closer look into the Church records revealed the fact that the Parish did not possess an own burial ground but buried their dead on the existing grave yards outside the city walls.

Finds in the pits as well as the stratigraphy dated the burials to the 2nd half of the 17th century, around 40 to 45 earlier than the French Parish Church. So we had to take another look into the Parish records: the ground was sold for 4000 dollars to the Parish in 1720 by Doctor Philipp Sigismund Stosch (MURET 1885). To find out more about Doctor Stosch was a real puzzle with still a lot of pieces lacking: Being born in 1656 near Blomberg in the Lippe region (nowadays Nordrhein-Westphalia), he became started his studies in medicine at the Viadrina University of Frankfurt/Oder in 1670, five years later he passed his PhD at the University of Utrecht with a thesis "De insomniis" (About dreams) (MUNDT & WICKERT 1977) which is available with only one remaining copy in the British Library in London. His uncle Bartholomaeus who was the court chaplain at the Electoral Court witnessed as warrantor in the Philipp Sigismund Stosch's examination process (MUNDT & WICKERT 1977). Over a ten year period, between 1680 and 1690, Dr. Stosch was part of the medical staff of the Brandenburg electoral court in Berlin, working as a medical attendant (BAHL 2001). After the death of Frederick Wilhelm, the Great Elector (1688) and his second wife Dorothea (1689) he must have left the capital of the Electorate of Brandenburg and then moved to Küstrin (today KostrynNad Odra, Poland). There he worked as superior public MD and later even became Mayor of the town. From 1698 Stosch was elected as a member to the oldest German Academy of Natural Sciences, the Leopoldina that still exists (NEIGEBAUER 1860, 216).

Nothing is known about the ten years that Doctor Stosch spent in Berlin and yet nothing could be revealed about any medical-anatomical activities he might have been involved in there, so we have to give just a short insight into medical history in the late 17th century: it was the time of dark ages of medical research, even though the Leopoldina published from 1670 on reports about section on dead bodies, it was not common to medical doctors to learn about the inside of human beings (BRATHER 1997, 221f).

In 1701 the Royal Prussian Society of Sciences was founded, including a class of Natural Sciences where medical Doctors were members. From 1717 - 1731 onwards Medical Sections have been published by J. F. GOHL as „ActamedicorumBerlinensium in incrementumartis et scientiarumcollecta et digesta“ with details about the living conditions of the people whose dead body used for sections. However, those people served during lifetime as soldiers, were criminals or executed criminals, committed suicide and were women who died while giving birth to a child or during pregnancy. Unfortunately we know nearly nothing about the beginning of medical research by the help of private sections and it seems that the medical doctor was among those private researchers even though we have not yet found his confession in form of a publication or private letter to his colleagues.

The six skeletons found in the backyard of Philipp Sigismund Stosch's then residence, shed a rather suspicious light on his work: 35 to 40 years after he might have exercised his medical research in or nearby his private home he sold the ground being certainly sure that all traces had disappeared. But they did not; the bones whiteness what happened in those dark ages of medical history a backyard of a Berlin garden.



Fig.1 – Berlin, Great Jewish Courtyard, the burials (Copyright: Anja Grothe / Ken Thömel, Landesdenkmalamt Berlin)

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