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Addressing the Unknown: the Funeral Bier as a Medium

Abstract: The funeral bier was a common object in Christian funerals in Finland from the Middle Ages up to the Second World War. The bier was used throughout Europe for carrying the deceased into the church or to the gravesite, in the funerals of both the nobility and commoners. The biers were simple wooden stretchers, but some of them also carried death-related imagery and texts. They also served as stands under the coffins, and images of such arrangements also appeared alongside texts in printed funeral works.

The funeral bier has been a largely overlooked object in scholarly studies in art, cultural, and literary history. This article focuses on the funeral bier and its use as a medium of communication in Early Modern Finland. The aim is to show how messages between the living and the dead, and the transcendental and the mundane in a broader sense could have been conveyed during and after the Lutheran funeral through the funeral bier. As an object, the bier was combined with text in two different ways: adding image compositions featuring biers to printed texts and adding texts to actual biers. This is illustrated with selected cases of Finnish funeral biers depicted in 17th-century funeral works, and extant biers from the 18th and 19th centuries, focusing on how the funeral bier could have served as a medium for addressing the unknown, that is, for communicating with the transcendental realm.

Keywords: Funeral bier, Funeral, Funeral work, Early Modern print, Funerary custom, Object studies

Fig. 1. The title page of a funeral work (entitled "Klage-Rijm", or "Mourning poem") for Lieutenant Colonel Johan Bäck. Printed in folio by Johan Winter, Turku, 1680. National Library of Finland.

Addressing the Unknown: the Funeral Bier as a Medium

Saila Leskinen

Introduction

The bier has "always" been used to carry corpses to the grave, on church premises or even over long distances, wrote Antero Warelius, the Finnish priest and writer, in 1861 about his ethnographic expeditions in Finland.[1] A funeral bier (Fi. *ruumispaarit*, Swe. *likbår*) is a wooden stretcher with four to eight legs and two handles at both ends. In Christian Europe, the bier was used as a means of transport, that is, to carry the deceased in funeral processions, or simply, inside the church or to the gravesite in the church yard. It could also serve as a stand under the coffin during funeral sermons and services. In Finland, the funeral bier was commonly used in funerals from the Middle Ages onward, until the Second World War.

The funeral bier appears in descriptions of funerary customs, such as Olaus Magnus' *Description of the Northern Peoples* (1555), according to which the deceased is carried in a convoy on a splendid bier. In the associated woodcut illustration, only the long handles of the bier are visible from under the decorated pall.[2] The Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus' post-reformation description of the funeral of a Swedish nobleman demonstrates how the medieval and Roman Catholic custom persisted well into the Early Modern and Lutheran era. The

old custom was also present in Finland, which was part of the Swedish realm from the Middle Ages until the early 19th century.[3]

There are no surviving biers in Finland from before the mid-18th century, but they are often mentioned in church inventories from between the 17th and 20th centuries and in publications that inventory and document churches and their interiors, furnishings and individual objects.[4] The Early Modern bier can also be seen in 17th-century woodcut images of funerary objects included in printed funeral works: compilations of funerary texts that were printed, bound, and published on the occasion of upper-class funerals. A coffin on a bier, covered with a funeral pall, is a common motif in these works, either as a vignette or incorporated into a headpiece. The bier is not depicted on its own, but most often as part of this larger composition.

This article examines both surviving biers and printed images of biers, putting them in the context of the funeral as an occasion. While Early Modern funerary customs have been scrutinised in many scholarly fields, the funerary objects themselves – especially the bier – have often been overlooked or bypassed. The funeral was the last opportunity to see the deceased and address the last words. The aim of this article is to show that the bier was prominently present on this occasion, and it can be interpreted as having worked as a medium of communication: a piece that participates in relaying messages both ways.

The Christian burial in general is considered to have a declarative motive and a didactic function. The burial rites emphasise the main elements of the faith, notably the hope of resurrection. Through the funeral sermon, the congregation was able to learn about death and proper burial in addition to the exemplary biography of the deceased. The Lutheran burial ceremony as a whole was aimed at the living, but it also reflected the idea that the deceased was a member of the congregation even after death. However, the dead were waiting peacefully for their resurrection and needed no specific action from the living.[5] The funeral can be seen as the last chance to interact with them, as well as an occasion to come into closer contact with the transcendental realm.

In the 17th century – the era of Lutheran Orthodoxy – the deceased in their coffin was carried into the church with a funeral bier. The bier was placed next to the pulpit, where it remained for the regular service, followed by the funeral sermon and other speeches, after which the actual burial took place. The funeral sermon became a common part of the funeral service, but it was only

delivered on the condition that the deceased was to be buried inside the church. In practice, this concerned upper-class funerals.[6] The sermons usually referred to the deceased as the one lying on the bier.[7] It was as if the person who had died was there to listen to the sermons and attend the service for the last time. Sometimes, the bier as an object was referred to in funeral poems as well: in addition to the deceased lying on a bier, the attendees were also referred to as the ones gathered around the bier. A piece of funeral work from 1685 is even entitled "Unfading flowers scattered around the Sorrow-bier".[8]

These kinds of funerary prints fall in the category of occasional literature,[9] and they vary from single broadsheets to booklets in folio, quarto, or octavo formats, to bound collections containing dozens or even hundreds of pages. Despite being rather common in Lutheran regions, there is no established general term for such funerary publications. The printed literature, whether in Finnish or Swedish, is often classified according to the specific text a publication contains, e.g. funeral poems or funeral sermons. Some terms refer to speeches or talks that took place at the funeral (Fi. *hautauspuhe*, Sw. *gravtal*), but that did not necessarily result in printed format. In his dissertation, the Swedish linguist Göran Stenberg discussed funeral sermons and funeral speeches as separate genres. He used the term *sepulchral rhetoric* as a genre that encompasses both.[10] For printed publications, I use the term *funeral work*, as defined by Cornelia Niekus Moore in her study on German funeral biographies, to refer to any printed text or publication of any size or in any volume that resulted from a funeral service and that contains some or all of the following: a funeral sermon, a funeral biography, and commemorative poems, songs or epitaphs.[11]

Not every funeral took place inside a church. Commoners were most often buried in the church yard, and the last words were spoken there, during the act of burying the deceased in the ground.[12] The custom of church burials gradually diminished during the 18th century. This was partially due to practical reasons such as lack of burial space, and partially to ideological and theological ones. Corpses under the church floor were deemed unhygienic and a straightforward health hazard. This was in line with the more secular views of the Enlightenment: the church was to be a bright, fresh, and healthy space for the living. Both Lutheranism and pietism aimed at making funerals more modest and pious occasions, since salvation was not to be achieved through wealth. New graves inside the church were prohibited in 1783, and church burials in

1822, when Finland was already under Russian rule. Burying the deceased in the church yard had become a common practice, and the burial grounds gradually expanded and separated from the church building.[13]

For burial in the ground, the deceased was brought into the church yard (by whatever means necessary and available) and then carried to the gravesite on a bier. The funeral usually took place before the service in the church. A Swedish church law of 1686 stated that every parish had to have at least two biers for parishioners to use, and a church ordinance of 1737 required that there must be two biers for adults and (a smaller) one for children. There was a small fee to use the bier, and a larger fee for the pall. Sometimes old, worn out or even broken biers and palls were available for a lower cost or even free of charge.[14] This underlined the differences in social status, but at the same time, expressed equality amongst the parishioners: a proper funeral with associated paraphernalia was made available for everyone.

Many ethnographers and historians have mentioned the bier,[15] but very few scholarly studies have been published focusing specifically on funeral biers, in Finland or elsewhere. The Danish theologian and material culture historian Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen published an article (2014) on funeral biers, investigating surviving 18th-century biers in Denmark, and discussing their visual and emblematic qualities. Considering Finnish material, I have provided an overview of surviving biers in Finland (2010) and furthermore discussed their textual universe and how they balance sacrality and profanity (2017).[16]

In Finland, funeral works have been studied in recent years by book historian Anna Perälä.[17] Her principal work *Suomen typografinen atlas* (2000a–b) contains samples of typographic and decorative material from printing shops in Finland which were founded in the 17th and 18th centuries. Furthermore, she has studied the origin and the makers of woodcuts printed in Finland in the aforementioned era (2003), as well as printed works dedicated to the printers themselves (2023). Funeral works are also currently being studied by literary researcher Eeva-Liisa Bastman (e.g. 2021). The Finnish material is naturally comparable and related to material from neighbouring areas. For example, Estonian book historian Tiiu Reimo has published an overview of the visualization of death and dying in foreign-language printed works published in Estonia in the 17th and 18th centuries (2019), using Swedish and Finnish material as comparison.

In the following, I will discuss how the funeral bier can be seen as a means of

communication between this world and the world beyond. First, I examine examples of 17th-century funeral works from the *Congratulatory Poems, Funeral Sermons and Speeches*-collection (Fi. *Henkilörunous*, Sw. *Personskrifter*) in the National Library of Finland. The collection encompasses conferment, wedding and funeral poetry in Latin, Swedish and Finnish; it includes poems, sermons and speeches, and covers the period from 1562 to 1821. In these sources the image of the bier is associated with the written word. Moving forward in time, I will demonstrate how the biers, as physical objects, carried the written word on them. This will be illustrated with surviving Finnish biers from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Images of objects

A composition of three objects – the coffin, the bier, and the funeral pall covering them – seen in the church during the funeral sermon and other speeches was one of the typical elements of the title page of a funeral work. This arrangement of objects could also appear as a vignette at the end or in-between texts, or – especially in the early 18th century – in the headpiece.

Funeral works were written on the occasion, i.e. for a specific funeral. While a priest composed the funeral sermon, other works, such as poems, were written by friends and family, bought from students, or commissioned from professional writers. The works have been estimated to have run in small editions of around 100 copies. Printing was expensive, and the more images one had, and the more elaborate they were, the greater the cost. Rich decorative elements were in fashion during the Baroque era,[18] and they reflected the ostentatious tendencies of the upper-class funeral. The prints were made for the funeral or compiled and bound as a collection (even several years) afterwards. They were designed as mementos that tended to become collectibles, but they also aimed to inspire religious reflection.[19] The majority of surviving printed funeral works in Finland were made for the nobility and clergy, with both deceased males and females represented in nearly equal numbers.[20]

The image from the title page of the funeral work for Erik Pederson Rooth (1641), the commander of Kajaani Castle, presents the draped black pall as a prominent element (fig. 2). The pall also features three crowns, the national emblem of Sweden. The coffin is not visible underneath it, but the presence of the bier is indicated by the protruding handles and the tips of legs.[21] The


Graff-Skrifft/
Öfwer Fordom/
Ehrligh och Manhafftigh/
Erick Pederson Rooth/
Hopman på Cajaneborgh:
Then/
LAURENTIUS WIVALLIUS,
Ther Sammastädes Fängen/vthi Februarij
Månadh ståldt hafftwer/
På thet Åhr/ efter Christi Börd/
M. DC. XLI.
Tryckt i Stockholm/ Åhr 1641.

Fig. 2. The title page of a funeral work (entitled "Graff-Skrifft", or "Grave inscription") for Erick Pederson Rooth, the commander of Kajaani Castle in northern Finland. Printed in Stockholm 1641, unknown publisher. National Library of Finland.

funeral pall was a valuable textile, and thus a more important element in many printed images than the bier, which probably was considered a mere practical structure. The title page of the funeral poem for Lieutenant Colonel Johan Bäck (1680) presents a black fringed canopy over a richly decorated coffin with a crucifix on top (fig. 1, p. 102). Since the pall is not present, the bier is visible: it is depicted as a sturdy, table-like structure with six legs and spherical elements on the legs and the ends of the handles.[22]

A broadsheet containing funeral poems and epitaphs was printed for pastor Jacobus Pauli Raumannus in 1679 (fig. 3). The image in the upper part of


CONTEMPLARE VIATOR,
VITÆ TUÆ SPECULUM,
IN VIRO
DUM VIVEBAT
Fl. Reverendo ac Doctissimo,
DN. JACOBO PAULI RAUMANNO,
Præposito & Pastore Birckalensium fidelissimo meritissimoq;
Jam vero inter superos Beato.
EPITAPHIUM.
DAN. SARCOVIUS.
THOMÆ Birckium.

Fig. 3. A broadsheet funeral work for Jacobus Pauli Raumannus, a pastor and provost of the Pirkkala parish, Pirkanmaa region. Printed by Peter Hanssons enckia (widow), Turku 1679. National Library of Finland.

the sheet presents the coffin on a bier, covered with a simple fringed pall with a white cross on it and surrounded by angels praising the name of God.[23] The text begins below the image with an exhortation in Latin: "Contemplate, traveller, the mirror of your life, in the man while he was alive."[24] Epitaphs for the clergy often highlighted the exemplary features of the late shepherd. The Latin word *epitaphium* stems from Antiquity, where it referred to words, especially spoken words, on the gravesite (Gr. επιτάφιος λόγος, *epitaphios logos*; words over or upon a tomb).[25] Ancient epitaph inscriptions typically urged the *viator*, or traveller, to pause and reflect on their own mortality. These types of epitaphs

Fig. 4. The second page of a funeral work for Catharina and Elisabetha Bockmöller. Printed in quarto by Johan Winter, Turku, 1670. National Library of Finland.

are found in Early Modern printed works as well, giving the impression that the reader is addressed directly.[26] The verses in funeral works entitled e.g. "epitaphium", "on the grave", or "grave inscription" were usually orated or sung by the gravesite at the moment of the lowering of the coffin.[27]

Christina Bockmöller, the wife of rector Johannes Grandelius, was buried in Uusikaarlepyy Church, in Ostrobothnia, on the western coast of Finland, in 1670 along with her sister, Elisabetha Bockmöller. On the second page of the funeral work, dedicated to both of them, the two sisters are represented by separate, but almost identical coffins on two biers (fig. 4).[28] A quote from the Psalms is written in Swedish above the upper image ("Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his Saints."[29]), and a quote from the Gospel of Matthew above the lower one ("The mayd is not dead/ but sleepeth."[30]), which probably refers to the lower coffin belonging to the younger sister, Elisabetha, who died young and unmarried.

In general, individuals were depicted each in their own coffins on separate biers. However, the individuals commemorated simultaneously might or might not have necessarily been related. A funeral work from 1690 (fig. 5) is dedicated to Martinus Olai Mustalenius, a public servant of the Royal Academy of Turku, who died at the age of 41. The title page of his funeral work presents two more coffins under Martinus': one for his mother Anna Thomas Dotter, who had

Fig. 5. The title page of a funeral work (entitled "Graaf-Steen", or "Gravestone") dedicated to Martinus Olai Mustalenius, Anna Thomas Dotter and Gustaff Johanson Sarcovius. Printed in folio by Johan Wall, Turku, 1690. National Library of Finland.

Fig. 6. Epitaph for Christina Staphanin tytär, broadsheet print by Petrus Wald, Turku 1652, 64.5 x 39.5 cm, wooden frame. From Marttila Church, southwestern Finland. National Museum of Finland, Historical collections H2362:6. Photo via Finna, CC BY 4.0.

died one year before at the age of 67 after having been bedridden and in great pain for 12 years; and a small one, for "the little child Gustaff Johanson Sarcovius, who did not taste the bitterness of this world for longer than six days and three hours".[31] The poems in the print do not address young Gustaff at all, and apparently he was not related to either of the other deceased, but he is commemorated through the image: his very own little coffin lies on a little bier under a little pall.[32]

An epitaph, printed on a single broadsheet that was then framed, could serve as an epitaph piece on its own, as is the case with the *epitaphium* for Christina Staphanin tytär ("daughter of Staphan"), the wife of Bartholdus Judius, a vicar's

brother (fig. 6). Here, the simple wooden frame is crowned with a triangular shape bearing a painted skull and crossbones (now barely visible).[33] Christina Staphanin tytär's *epitaphium* was printed in 1652 in the first printing shop in Finland: that of the Royal Academy of Turku, run by the printer Peder Wald. The vignette in the upper middle part of the sheet is flanked with biblical verses and depicts a coffin under a fringed black pall with a white cross and a running-dog ornament embroidered or appliquéd on it, laying on a bier with four profiled legs and curved handles.[34]

Funeral works in Finland were most commonly written in Swedish and Latin. Apart from titles and the associated names in Latin, however, Christina Staphanin tytär's epitaph is written entirely in Finnish. The Latin word *epitaphium* is written above the rest of the text, followed by a Finnish translation of the word: *Se On Haudan ylitzen Kirjoitus*, meaning "that is, inscription over the grave", which is very close to the original meaning of the word as it was used in Antiquity. In the lower part of the sheet there are four poems. The first poem is about the inevitability of death and the grief it causes. The second one is a funeral song, written as the lamentation of the widower. The last two poems are written as if they were spoken out by Christina's children, Margaretha and Samuel, who were both just toddlers at the time. In the poem, the daughter directly addresses her late mother: "O, o my beloved Mother! Are you already abandoning our father! And us, the little ones to cry. Is God to look after us? We will not see you again in this life, but in the joy of Father Abraham."[35]

The poems are "for the consolation of the bereaved husband and relatives, written in haste by Ericus Justander", a professor of poetry in Turku.[36] Funeral poems traditionally consist of three main elements: extolment, lament and consolation.[37] Here, Christina is described in an idealised manner: as pious, chaste, and beloved. Her family mourns and misses her, and through the poems, communicates their feelings, which the reader is supposed to identify with. In funeral poetry, the dialogue usually takes place between the closest relations of the deceased – such as spouses and next of kin – and the deceased or even death itself, presented as a person. The poems also often aim to give the impression of having been written swiftly or even hastily at the gravesite and at the very moment of the last farewell.[38] I argue that the associated image aims for the same: to create a backdrop for the words, to visually represent that final moment, and the person one wants to address.

The German pastor Philipp Hahn (1558–1616) said in one of his funeral sermons:

> When one preaches a funeral sermon while the body of the deceased is present underneath the pulpit, it affects the listeners more and reaches their hearts, because now they can see with their eyes what they otherwise would only hear with their ears. It is as if the deceased speaks and says: "*Hodie mihi, cras tibi*, just as I have died, you will die too." The example is right there and the sermon reaches the heart and moves a person, so that he will go inside himself, think about his final hours in the hope of a joyous resurrection, prepare for a blessed departure, and be consoled.[39]

Catchphrases from Antiquity appear regularly in connection with the images in funeral works. The aforementioned *Hodie mihi, cras tibi* ("Today me, tomorrow you") is amongst the most common, along with e.g. *Memento mori* ("Remember that you will die"). In Finland, these appear mostly in Latin or Swedish alongside classical symbols of death, such as skulls, scythes, and hourglasses. The catchphrases often appear inside headpieces, or in direct connection with the coffin composition, as we see in fig. 7.[40]

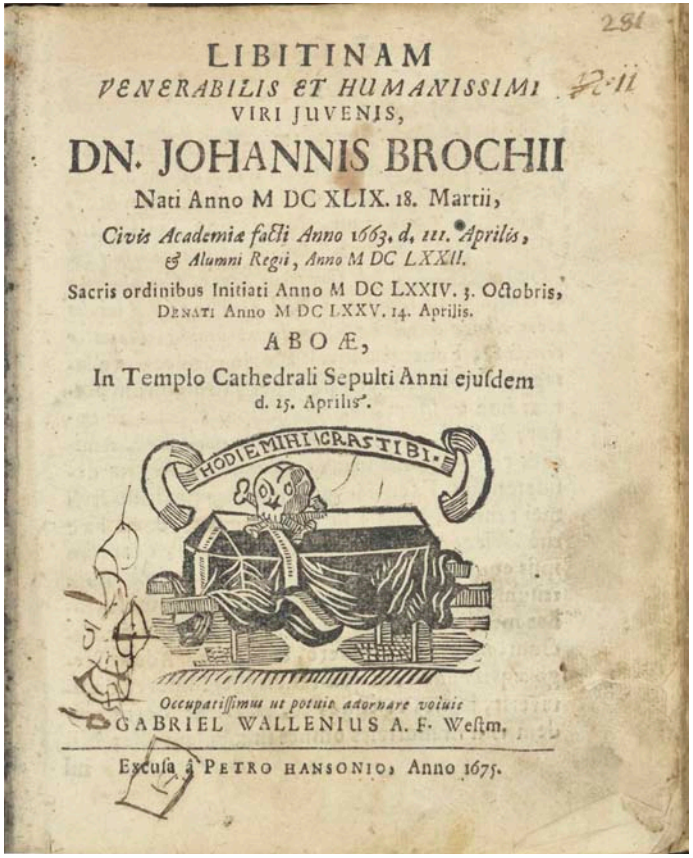
LIBITINAM
VENERABILIS ET HUMANISSIMI
VIRI JUVENIS,
DN. JOHANNIS BROCHII
Nati Anno M DC XLIX. 18. Martii,
Civis Academiæ facti Anno 1663. d. 111. Aprilis,
& Alumni Regii, Anno M DC LXXII.
Sacris ordinibus Initiati Anno M DC LXXIV. 3. Octobris,
Denati Anno M DC LXXV. 14. Aprilis.
ABOÆ,
In Templo Cathedrali Sepulti Anni ejuſdem
d. 15. Aprilis.
HODIE MIHI CRAS TIBI.
Occupatiſſimus ut potuit adornare voluit
GABRIEL WALLENIUS A. F. Weſtm.
Excuſa à PETRO HANSONIO, Anno 1675.

Fig. 7. The title page of a funeral work for Johannes Brochius, a young priest from the Turku bishopric, 1675. The vignette with a skull on top of the coffin, and a banner stating "hodie mihi cras tibi", was used in works printed in Turku beginning in the 1650s and is probably the work of a local block carver. Printed in octavo by Petrus Hanson, Turku, 1675. National Library of Finland.

Fig. 8. A headpiece on the second page (the first text page) of a funeral work for Mrs. Maria Elisabeth Hertz, the wife of Henrich Thuronius, District Judge of Masku and Mynämäki in the Turku Province (län). Printed in folio by Johan Christopher Merckell, Turku, 1739. Image: National Library of Finland (cropped).

Funeral works were composed and printed well into the 19th century, when different kinds of funerary and commemorative texts gradually began to appear in newspapers. The Baroque prints became lighter and less ornate in the 18th century, and images of objects and old death symbols grew smaller in size before disappearing from the imagery.[41] As an example, a headpiece from 1739 (fig. 8) presents the familiar composition of a bier, coffin, and a pall in miniature size, centred inside a wreath, flanked with draped female figures, and most prominently flowers, emphasizing the heavenly joy and resurrection in Paradise.[42]

Objects with a message

The bier itself was a simple wooden structure, sometimes decorated with carved or painted elements. As a staple piece of equipment in the church inventory and as an object of frequent use, the bier was regularly replaced with a new one when needed. The parish typically commissioned the bier from a local crafts-

man, and also paid for it, which is sometimes specifically stated on the bier. The account books of parishes show that the bier was not considered an expensive or luxurious item.[43]

As seen in the 17th-century printed works, the bier was often depicted very simply, almost invisible under the pall, which shows that the pall was considered an object of value and prestige, and thus also the main visual element.[44] As an easy way to cut down on costs, the pall was not always used, especially in the funerals of commoners, or those with less wealth. Thus, in these cases the bier itself was bare for the spectators to see.

The oldest extant biers in Finland today are from the mid-1700s. One of these is a bier from Mynämäki from the 1760s (fig. 9). The painted surface is relatively well preserved. On both ends there is a carved skull in relief with an hourglass, the sand of which has run out. The inscription on the other end cites 2 Timothy 4:18: "The Lord shall deliuer mee from euery euill worke, and

Fig. 9. The bier from Mynämäki (Mietoinen), southwestern Finland, 1760s. Photo Kari Ahtiainen, Mynämäki parish.

Fig. 10. The bier from Hartola, 1767, Museum of Eastern Tavastia. The original black surface of the bier has worn off except under the areas painted white. Photo Saila Leskinen.

will preserue me vnto his heauenly kingdome."[45] On the opposite end there is a long inscription in Finnish, that states that the bier was donated by the chaplain and vice vicar of the parish, on the occasion of the death of his eldest son.[46] The inscription ends with the phrase "It was my turn today, tomorrow it will be yours," and a separate line on a board underneath tells the viewer to "Always remember that."[47] The speaker in both the Bible verse and the aforementioned two phrases can be interpreted as the deceased, especially when seen simultaneously, on the occasion when the deceased was actually present.

The catchphrase *Hodie mihi, cras tibi* is in line with the Lutheran attitude towards death: one should lead a good life here and now and find salvation through Christ. The phrase is common on Finnish biers, both in Finnish and Latin. In a bier from Hartola from 1767 (fig. 10) the same phrase is presented alongside with a variant of a Protestant sola: *Summo Deo Soli Gloria* ("Glory to the Most High God Alone").[48] On the other end of the bier there is a Bible verse in Finnish, from Philippians 2:12: "Worke out your owne saluation with feare, and trembling."[49] This can be interpreted as the voice of a preacher, who directly addresses the reader and tells them to fear and tremble. This is a power-

ful lesson of humility but also expresses the Lutheran idea of salvation by faith alone. The burnt-out candle and a skull with crossbones highlight the urgency of the message.

The inscriptions on biers combine popular elements (such as universal death symbols and catchphrases) with religious ones. In contrast with the potentially frightening themes, the Bible verses also offer consolation by referring to the hope of resurrection and salvation; they also serve a didactic function by reminding the reader to lead a good Christian life. For example, a bier from Irjanne parish in southwestern Finland, includes Biblical verses that reflect the idea, "Today me, tomorrow you", offering a lesson in humility. The passages selected from the apocryphal book of Sirach read: "Why is earth and ashes proude? It will come to an end nonetheless: he that is to day a King, to morrow shall die."[50] It is notable that this verse is painted on the long side of the bier. Unlike the inscriptions on the ends of the bier, the sides would have been visible only if the pall was not used. If it was not used because the family was poor, these words might have reminded them that death is the great equalizer, and even the mightiest would become earth and ashes.

All four sides of the bier were in use in Jämsä, where inscriptions were carved on a bier in both Latin and Finnish (fig. 11). On one end an inscription reads *Mors omnia solvit* ("Death resolves all"), with the basic Christian interpretation of this idea transposed into Finnish on one side: *Cuolema ombi synnin palcka* ("The wages of sin is death"). On the other side, the bier reads *Hodie mihi cras tibi*, with this idea transposed into Finnish on the other end: *Muista ettäs cuolet* ("Remember that you die").[51]

It was a common Lutheran ecclesiastical practice to utilise objects to support the teachings delivered in written or spoken form. One example of this practice is the pulpit, which was typically apparelled with both images and texts. The bier was a suitable medium for teaching people about death, thus furthering the ideas found in 17th-century funeral sermons.[52] Despite being a communal object, the bier was the responsibility of the church or the parish officials, and thus provided an opportunity to carry out an educational aim. Since the Protestant Reformation, offering ecclesiastical teaching in a common language was promoted. In Finland, Swedish was the official language of the realm, but Finnish was the most common language. Whereas the upper-class members of society spoke Swedish as their mother tongue and were probably educated

Fig. 11. The bier from Jämsä, central Finland, Church Museum of Jämsä. Photo Leena Havusto, Jämsä parish.

in Latin as well, Finnish commoners could not read Latin and most could not read Swedish either – if they were literate at all. It is notable that the Swedish language seems to be non-extant on Finnish biers. This supports the idea of the texts being aimed at commoners. The idea of learning in one's own language is visible in such a humble object as the bier.

The Bible was not the only religious text cited on biers. The bier from Sippola comes with small pieces of paper framed and attached under glass on both its ends (fig. 12). A hand-written note on one end dates the bier to 1829 and states the name of its maker. A note on the other end cites a 1701 hymnal. The chosen Finnish verse reads (freely translated) as: "Receive this body, o Earth, that we lay here in hope: bury him well as he is given to you to possess, let the willing rest in your repose." The "Old hymnal", as it is called in Finnish, is a Finnish edition of a Swedish hymnal from 1695, and it was used in Finland until the late 19th century. The hymn in question concerns death and burial and is to be sung at the gravesite during the act of throwing the earth upon the coffin; the hymn appears as early as the Agenda of 1693.[53] The verse does not address the

Fig. 12. The bier (1829) from Sippola (Kouvola), Kymenlaakso region, photographed in the von Daehn family burial chapel. The small object on top is a ceremonial spade for throwing earth on the coffin. The hand-written note (below) attached to the end of the bier quotes a funeral hymn in Finnish. Photos Saila Leskinen.

deceased but the Earth itself, which is seen as a peaceful place for repose while waiting for the resurrection.

In addition to delivering religious teachings and ideas, the biers carry also highly popular, even playful elements. On a bier from the Maaria parish (1809) the familiar verse "Today me, tomorrow you" is written in Finnish on one end. But on the other end, the tables have turned, and the text reads in an almost impish manner: "Today *you*, tomorrow *me*." The catchphrase can usually be interpreted as the deceased directly addressing the reader. But in this case, it becomes a dialogue: the reader gets a say as well and points out that they still *do* have time left – at least until tomorrow.[54]

Presenting the dead as speakers on biers tends to have a slightly mischievous tone. On a bier from Sastamala (1834), the texts are written on the ends of the bier, as if the speaker was aware that the reader would literally follow behind, in a procession to the grave. On one end, the deceased is saying: "Today me, tomorrow you are carried to the grave"[55], and continuing on the other end, in case the reader does not take the message seriously: "Oh yes you will follow me, even sooner than you think"[56] (fig. 13). This is not a known quote from any written source, and it is written in a colloquial manner, giving the message a personal touch: you will follow, you, the one walking behind this very bier.

Popular texts, such as catchphrases, were part of a long tradition, and older objects were most likely used as models for new ones. It is likely that parish officials, as commissioners, also had a say in selecting the statements found on biers, but it seems that in some cases they might have left this to the craftsmen to decide. The texts were sometimes written in capital letters, which makes the writing appear more archaic in style, but also more readable. Some texts are written in *Fraktur*, which makes them look more official, since *Fraktur* was also widely used in prints. Even in the 19th century, handwritten documents had by no means been completely replaced by printed ones; the use of cursive in texts painted on objects can thus be seen as somewhat official as well. Finnish grammar was not standardised in spoken or written form and the texts reflect local dialects and also mistakes (such as the letters S and W written backwards on the Sastamala bier). The hand of the scribe – a commoner – adds a personal touch to the object and its message, as spoken between members of the same community, between equals.

Fig. 13. The bier (1834) from Sastamala, southwestern Finland, St Mary's Church in Sastamala. Photo Urpo Vuorenoja.

The funeral bier as a medium

The funeral was the last occasion to see the deceased, to interact with them and address the last words. It was also an occasion to come into closer contact with the transcendental realm: to see, hear, reflect and even discuss death. The bier was prominently present in this occasion: it was used as a medium of transportation in both upper- and lower-class funerals, and it also served as a stand supporting the coffin while last words were said before lowering the coffin into the vault or into the ground. The bier was a common object in every parish and was routinely used in practically every funeral.

The funeral bier worked as a medium of communication with the transcendental realm: it was an object that participated in relaying messages both ways. Firstly, the funeral biers seen in the woodcut images of 17th-century funeral works add visual images to the words spoken at the funeral. The compositions featuring biers discussed here were not the only kind of images in funeral works,

but they were amongst the most common ones. They were most often used as vignettes, typically on the title sheet of a longer compilation but also on single broadsheets. The texts – funeral sermons and commemorative poems, songs, or epitaphs, both in spoken and written form – were intended for the bereaved, even if sometimes written as if addressed to the deceased. They combined a religious and a popular message: one should remember one's death but also remember to live well in the hope of resurrection and seeing loved ones again.

The image of a coffin on a bier can be seen as a representation of the deceased individual. This is evident especially when several decedents are commemorated in a single funeral work, and each one is depicted in their own coffin on a separate bier. This highlights the fact that the texts are connected to a specific funeral. The title pages usually mention not only the name of the decedent but also the date and place of the funeral. The image adds to the whole scene: the funeral is about the farewell and burial of that specific person. The printed text takes the reader to the moment and scene where the associated words were originally spoken: to the funeral in the church. Just as the deceased was "listening" to the words while lying on the bier next to the pulpit, the reader is encouraged to "listen" and contemplate the words again, be it as a relative who is reading the funeral work years after the funeral, or a passer-by who is seeing a framed epitaph sheet on a church wall.

Compositions of the coffin, bier and pall, amongst other images, have often been scrutinised as symbolic. Their religious nature is evident given their context. They can also be seen as emblematic: as attributes that characterise the work without being illustrative, that is, having a direct reference to the text content.[57] The images discussed here make it clear that the work in question is a funeral work. There are cases, however, where the images can be seen as illustrative: they correlate with the speeches given on the occasion. The image is thus more than just an illustration, decoration or a symbol of death in general. The image represents an individual, and when joined with the texts in the funeral works, it evokes the memory of a specific occasion where the individual was seen on this earth for the last time.

Funeral biers are often mentioned but seldom described. The biers seen in the funeral works are rare visual depictions of what the object looked like. While these images offer some details, they do not look like the exact objects used at the specific funeral; rather, they describe an occasion with a similar

composition. The bier is rarely completely visible, and is never depicted on its own, but as a vehicle under the coffin, most often covered by the funeral pall. These somewhat generic compositions were used in funeral works throughout Europe, testifying to the widespread existence and use of the objects depicted.

Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen has called the bier a physical representation of a ceremonial moment. The situation and the message are stored in the object that continues to communicate even apart from the ritual context. The bier as an object combines the elements of function (a means of transporting the corpse), imagery and words, thus making it a functional memento-mori piece.[58] The message is a straightforward call to remember one's own mortality – especially when attending a funeral, where a dead person is actually present. The close contact with actual dead bodies gives certain objects, such as the coffin and the bier, an enhanced "aura" of death. As pastor Hahn said in the early 17th century, listeners are more affected when they can not only hear, but also see and feel the nearness of death, almost as if the deceased speaks to them directly.

In this article, I have only examined selected examples from one collection of funeral works. The same material could be used to study, for example, the use and appearance of funerary palls and other funerary textiles such as canopies and draperies in connection with their supporting structures and larger ceremonial compositions, such as the *castra doloris*. Printed images of coffins – found also on their own without any bier or pall, and sometimes with an open lid – and their connection to the funerary occasion or still-existing coffins could be studied further.

In Finland, no biers have survived to this day from before the 18th century, probably because they were considered simple objects with a practical function that were used until no longer repairable and simply discarded and replaced with new ones. The oldest ones found today were probably in continuous use for 100 or even 150 years until the turn of the 20th century, when they were gradually omitted from funerary practice – and never replaced nor discarded. Here I have only used a narrow sampling, and I assume there are many more biers to be studied. But even this small selection suggests that the Finnish material has great variety both in its textual and iconographic content. For centuries the bier has had such an elemental role in the funeral that it has become self-

evident and thus almost invisible. Since biers no longer possess that role and meaning today, they evoke questions about their historical context. The bier could be linked e.g. to the long tradition of funeral processions.

The funeral bier itself as a physical object acted as a medium for relaying a message. Be it in the words of a preacher addressing the words of God to the congregation, the mourners addressing the Earth, or the dead convincing the living that they will follow, all this could be expressed by writing it on a bier. The bier was a communal object, shared by all. Instead of representing an individual, it underlines equality when facing the inevitable – or the unknown. This universality is juxtaposed with the funeral works, where the image can be seen to represent an individual and a specific funeral. The use of the bier, both as an object and an image, was both conventional and individually expressive. In the field of object studies, the bier draws attention to the materiality of death: the tangible reality underlying the practicalities of the funeral. The funeral bier is a medium used to literally cross the line from this world to the other, to be physically carried from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. The object, if only as an image, also evokes the memory of the moment of transition, and of the last words addressed in that moment.

Notes

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1 Warelius 1861, 24–25.
2 Olaus Magnus 1555, 566; Rimpiläinen 1971, 27; Perälä 2003, 77.
3 Rimpiläinen 1971, 118–119; see also Troels-Lund 1914, 199–200.
4 Such series of publications are e.g. *Suomen kirkot – Finlands kyrkor* (1912–1998), *Sveriges kyrkor – konsthistoriskt inventarium* (1912–) and *Danmarks Kirker* (1933–), all published by antiquarian and museum officials.
5 Rimpiläinen 1973, 33–43; Lempiäinen 2004, 213–219.
6 As an exception, sermons were sometimes also delivered for small children even from the lower-classes or if the burial took place in the church yard, as opposed to within the church itself. Rimpiläinen 1973, 33–43.
7 Rimpiläinen 1973, 43–48.
8 *Oförswinnelige Ähre-Blomster Strödde kring Den Ehreborne och Wällärde Studiosi Hr: Daniel Faxels Sorge-Båhr/ Då han Medelst Christloflige Ceremonier i Bierno Moder-Kyrckia Jordsattes medh en förnembligh Lijk-Process den 22. April Anno 1685*. A bound collection of funerary texts containing two sermons, the *consolatio*, and the aforementioned work of commemorative poems, songs and other texts. Printed by Johan Winter, Turku, 1685. National Library of Finland. All English translations are by the author unless stated otherwise.
9 Fi. *tilapäärunous*, *-kirjallisuus*, Sw. *tillfällesdiktning*, *-litteratur*: verbal and/or textual art composed for a specific occasion. Jussila 2024, 305. In Finnish and Swedish the terms *henkilörunous*, *-kirjallisuus* (Fi.) and *personskrifter* (Sw.) are also used. They refer to poetry or literature celebrating or commemorating their subjects i.e. specific persons. They encompass conferment, wedding and funeral poetry, sermons and speeches. See also p. 107.
10 Stenberg 1998, 35–48, 245–247.
11 Moore 2006, 19.
12 However, wealthy or respected members of the community were sometimes buried in the church regardless of their social class.
13 Viitaniemi 2018, 36–39, 47–54; Ilmakunnas 2019, 139–154; Paavola 1998, 37–46.
14 Rimpiläinen 1973, 43–48; Rimpiläinen 1971, 225, 261–262; Reimo 2019, 9.
15 See for example Rimpiläinen 1971 on the development of the funerary custom in Finland before the Great Wrath; Lönnqvist 2013 on ethnological studies of ritualised culture amongst the Swedish-speaking Finnish gentlefolk and peasantry; Nissi 2023 on death in the Middle Ages in Sweden, Italy, and Europe, esp. 161–167 on defining the term for a medieval bier.
16 Nyrkkö 2010; Leskinen 2017.
17 I wish to thank Anna Perälä for her expert help and the background materials for this article.
18 In Finland, the Baroque era in the art historical canon occurs roughly between the 1620s and the 1720s. The transition from Renaissance to Baroque took several decades, and only the latter half of the 17th century is considered High Baroque. The stylistic period faded away in the first decades of the 18th century. The era of Swedish Great Power (Fi. *Ruotsin suurvalta-aika*, Swe. *stormaktstiden*) (1611–1721) can even be considered an art epoch in itself: see Pirinen 1994.
19 Perälä 2023, 12–14; Perälä 2003, 168–170; Ridderstad 1980, 28–35; Stenberg 1998, 36–41; Moore 2006, 108–119.
20 Rimpiläinen 1973, 40–41; Reimo 2019, 26–27.
21 The same image occurs in many Finnish prints for the nobility, both male and female. The image or subtle variations of it are widely used in funeral works also in Sweden and Germany; see Moore 2006, 92, where no emblem is depicted on the pall; see also Wisłocki 2005, 405, where the end of the coffin is adorned with a whole and detailed coat of arms.
22 Canopies can be found in several prints, tending to commemorate the upper strata of society. Canopies are also found as separate printing blocks that could be added to the image composition upon request; see Perälä 2000a, 170–171, 216–217. The image in fig. 1 is also found without the canopy: Perälä 2000a, 224–225. See also Perälä 2000b, 138–139; Jürgensen 2014, 103; Reimo 2019, 28–30; Troels-Lund 1911, 223—224.
23 See Perälä 2000a, 210–211 for similar images.
24 *Contemplare viator, vitae tuae speculum, in viro dum viveret.*
25 On the use of the term epitaph in art history, see Tuhkanen 2005, 157–164.
26 See also Ridderstad 1980, 27–28.
27 Perälä 2023, 88; see also Stenberg 1998, 215.
28 This image is often found with slight variations in the works printed for clergymen, scholars, and also women, and it is also commonly found in Sweden; see Perälä 2000b, 132–135.
29 *Psal. 116. v. 15. Hans Helgons dödh är dyyr hållen för HERranom*. English verse: King James Version (1611).
30 *Matth. 9. v. 14. Pijgan är icke dödh/ men hon sofwer*. English verse: King James Version (1611), Matthew 9: 24.
31 *Sampt den späda pilten Gustaff Iohanson Sarcovius, som intet längre denne werldennes bitterheet smakade än allenast 6 dagar och 3 tijmars tijdh.*
32 There are also cases where a young child is commemorated in a funeral work dedicated to them only. The images in the Mustalenius print are fairly common; see Perälä 2000a, 207, 209–213, 219, 223; Perälä 2000b, 129.

33 Another example is the epicedion for the vicar Matthaeus Nicolai Ryngen (d. 1614), also from Marttila Church. Riska 1985, 45–46. Framed 17th-century print sheets as epitaphs are also found from e.g. Sääksmäki Church.
34 The maker of the woodcut block is unknown, but it probably originates from Stockholm. It was used in several printed works in Finland in the 1640s and 1650s. Perälä 2000a, 204–205.
35 *Margarethae primogenitae planctus. ACh/ Ach armast Äitiseni/ Jocos jätät Isäseni! Me myös pienet Pickuraiset. Itkemähän Imewäiset. JUmal Meist murhen pitäkän? En Me sinua sinä ikän/ Näe enä täsä Elos/ Wa~n Isän Abramin Ilos.*
36 *Surullisele jälkenjänelle Miehelle ja Suculaisille Lohdutoxexi kijruhusti Kirjoitti Ericus Johannis Justander.*
37 Bastman 2021, 53–54; Stenberg 1998, 166–169.
38 Bastman 2021, 46, 60—61; Stenberg 1998, 37.
39 *Die neuende Leichpredigt* from the funeral work for Barthold Huenicke (1542–1603), cited in English in Moore 2006, 29.
40 Perälä 2003, 27; Perälä 2000a, 206–207; Reimo 2019, 28–29; Jürgensen 2014, 103.
41 Perälä 2023, 86; Stenberg 1998, 243.
42 See also Perälä 2000b, 198–199.
43 Leskinen 2025, 139–141.
44 See also Jürgensen 2014, 98.
45 *HERra pelasta minun Caikesta Pahasta teosta ja autta hänen Taiwalliseen waldacundaansa. 2. Tim. 4 v. 18.* English verse: King James Version (1611).
46 *Lahjoitettu Capplaiselda ja vice kirckoherralda Mietoisisa herr Mag Pietar Sonckilda, hänen rackan wanhimban Poicansa Poieslähdendän ohesa ajallisen Cuoleman cautta.*
47 *Tänäpän oli minun wuoron, huomena taas sinun; Muista aina sitä.*
48 *Sola* refers to a phrase with the Latin word *solus*, *-a* ("alone"); the Protestant *solae* represent the key principles of the Protestant faith. The fifth sola, *Soli Deo gloria* ("Glory to God alone"), originally refers to reserving all veneration for God alone (as opposed to the veneration of saints in Catholicism). The phrase is often seen in the post-Reformation era on Lutheran objects donated to churches as a reminder that the pieces are to honor God (and not the donator); see e. g. Tuhkanen 2005, 128. However, here a longer formula is used, which I interpret as a more archaic one, using *Summus Deus* ("the Most High God") instead of *Deus* ("God"), originally referring to one true God in Early Christianity (as opposed to polytheistic Roman religion); see Toom 2014.
49 *Laittacat pelvolla ja Wapistuxella että te autuaxi tulisitta. Philip. 2 v. 12.* English verse: King James Version (1611).

50 *Mitäs koreilet sinä Wajwainen tuhka ja mulda. Nin se kuitengin sihen loppu: Tänäpänä Kuningas, Huamena Kuolut. Sijr: 10: v: 9: 12.* English verse: King James Version (1611), Ecclesiasticus 10: 9, 10. The bier is undated, but probably from the late 18th century.
51 The bier is undated, but probably from the first half of the 19th century. Leskinen 2017, 14–15. The Latin phrase *Mors omnia solvit*, originally stemming from a Roman juridical context, is also found in funeral works, see for example Perälä 2000a, 228–231.
52 Jürgensen 2014, 104, 112.
53 *Wastan ota maa ruumis tätä jong tähän toiwos laskein jätäm, kätke hyvin kuin annet on halduus Anna lewossas lewätä aldis.* In *Uusi Suomenkielinen Wirsi-Kirja* (1701), hymn 399, verse 11. Leskinen 2017, 12–13. On the use of hymns and Swedish hymnbooks in the context of comfort and support in connection with death from the 17th–19th centuries in Sweden, see Arvidsson 2004.
54 Leskinen 2025, 139–141.
55 *Tänäpänä minä huomena sinä hautan kanetan.*
56 *Kylä peräsänin tulet, wielä pikemin kos lulete.*
57 Perälä 2000a, 30–31; see also Reimo 2019, 6–7.
58 Jürgensen 2014, 108.

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