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Brill
2018

Lahtinen , A 2018 , Death with an Agenda : Preparing for an Aristocratic Death in
Reformation Sweden . in A Lahtinen & M Korpiola (eds) , Dying Prepared in Medieval and
Early Modern Northern Europe . Brill , pp. 124-141 .

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/325503>

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Death with an Agenda: Preparing for an Aristocratic Death in Reformation Sweden

Introduction

My chapter¹ deals with accounts of men and women of high nobility, aristocracy, preparing for their own deaths in late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Sweden. The seventeenth century offers posterity plenty of funeral sermons and so-called *personalia*, Lutheran obituaries or funeral biographies in which the departure of a dying person was described in terms of *mors beata*, the ideal and conventional description of death. Originally inspired by descriptions of Luther's pious departure, *personalia* presented an individual example of *ars moriendi*.² In the case of the sixteenth century, the sources are more scattered. However, there are some surviving descriptions of noble persons preparing for death in the late 1590s, in many cases following the principles that were also present in later *personalia*.³

The *personalia* have been previously studied in order to discover biographic information, gendered representations or other representations of an idealised life course and Lutheran representations of a *mors beata*. Likewise, the idea of *mors beata* has been analysed via *personalia*. In the following, however, I will take a different starting point and focus on a detailed analysis of special cases. I will combine analyses of *personalia* and other kinds of sources describing the preparations for death. My focus shall be on the agendas and the messages directed to those who would be left behind.⁴

¹ This article has been written under the auspices of projects *Gender and Family in Finland, Medieval to Modern* (Emil Aaltonen Fund) and *Letters and Songs: Registers of Beliefs and Expressions in the Early Modern North* (Academy of Finland, project no. 288119).

² About funeral biographies in Lutheran Germany and Scandinavia, see Volker Leppin, "Preparing for Death. From the Late Medieval *ars moriendi* to the Lutheran Funeral Sermon," in *Preparing for Death, Remembering the Dead*, eds. Tarald Rasmussen and Jon Øygarden Flaeten, (Refo500 Academic Studies) 22 (Göttingen, 2015), pp. 9-23; Eivor Andersen Oftestad, "Transforming the Investment in the Afterlife: Readings of the Poem *De Vita Hominis* in Pre-Reformation and Post-Reformation Denmark", in *Cultures of Death and Dying in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, *COLLeGIUM: Studies Across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 18 (2015), pp. 194-95; About *mors beata* in a Swedish context, for example, Göran Stenberg, *Döden dikterar: En studie av likpredikningar och gravtal från 1600- och 1700-talen* (Stockholm, 1998); Markus Hagberg, ed., *Jean Gersons Ars moriendi: Om konsten att dö*, (Skara stiftshistoriska sällskaps skriftserie) 45 (Skara, 2009); Otfried Czaika's chapter in this volume.

³ See, for example, *Personalia* in *Skoklostersamlingen* 1, vol. 74, Riksarkivet [National Archives of Sweden, hereafter RA], Stockholm, Sweden.

⁴ Previously, I have analysed power and resistance in connection with the execution of Johan Fleming. See Anu Lahtinen, "A Nobleman's Death: Power Struggle and Resistance in Accounts of a Political Execution in Early Modern Sweden," in *Rebellion and Resistance*, ed. Henrik Jensen (Pisa, 2009), pp. 33-49.

Thus, I go beyond searching for the general ideal of *ars moriendi* and focus on the practical adaptations that people resorted to, or were described resorting to. In other words, my focus is on how the dying person--and those who would later describe her or his death--coped with the fact that a death never quite followed the ideal pattern. Attention is also paid to the observation by Otfried Czaika, presented elsewhere in this volume, that in the Reformation period, one's whole life was seen as a preparation for death.

I shall begin with the observation that although Reformation *ars moriendi* put emphasis on the individual, denying the power of intercession of family members,⁵ preparing for death was not only a personal issue between a dying (noble) person, God, and the closest family members. Nor were descriptions of death preparations neutral accounts; instead, emphasis was placed on the social status, political role, and other material matters of the persons involved. A noble death and its accounts had political, economic, and social consequences, most strikingly so in such times of political turmoil that hit Sweden at the turn of the seventeenth century. Even in more peaceful times, however, many economic or personal issues could be at stake, and *personalia* and other documents could address these issues.

The ultimate moments, final greetings, and last wishes or wills were a very powerful way of communicating the values and interests of the dying to those left behind. It is also very illustrative of the social dynamics of the time to discover who was active in constructing, maintaining, and distributing the descriptions. Thus, in the following, I shall introduce political, economic, and other agendas that can be deciphered in the descriptions of a noble death.

Preparing for Death: Theory and Practice

As is well known, accounts of early modern deathbed scenes usually follow the medieval tradition of *mors beata*, the ideal course of preparing for departure. The dying person was supposed to excel in *ars moriendi*, art of dying, and to follow a certain procedure when preparing to meet one's maker. This procedure was famously presented in 1408 in the guidelines titled *De arte moriendi* by Jean Gerson (1363-1429), and later in the Reformation period, new versions and guidelines were

⁵ Oftestad, "Transforming the Investment in the Afterlife", pp. 115-25.

given in service books in Latin and in vernacular languages.⁶ It was important to resign to the inevitable, to turn to the afterlife with the help of a priest, pious prayers, and bidding near relatives and others farewell and trying to make peace with those who would be left behind. Finally, the person was expected to entrust her/himself to the will of God and to part hence in God's Grace.⁷

This pattern has been typical for other periods and times as well: anthropologists have discussed the notion of "good death" in different societies. Now as then, many cultures placed emphasis on the need to face death peacefully, in harmony with God and other human beings. After the moment of death, an honourable burial was also an essential part of a good death, as I have discussed in another article, and preparations for the funeral and arrangements for a respectable burial place were often done well beforehand.⁸ Quite understandably, the Reformation brought some changes to the medieval Catholic *ars moriendi*, as the intercessions of relatives no longer paid any role and as purgatory no longer offered a chance to repent in the hereafter. New *ars moriendi* literature, such as *Seelenartznei* (1529) by Reformer Urbanus Rhegius (1489-1541), was published in vernacular language, including Swedish.⁹

Funeral sermons and *personalia*, of course, tend to repeat the patterns of a good death. It was customary to describe the dying person to have lived a pious life, to have been a devout Christian, and to have departed beautifully and piously in due time. The plot for dying was important for the contemporaries, and they did their best to imitate the ideal manuscript. This does not mean that the descriptions were all of a piece. There were variations, from more politically motivated topics to descriptions of special incidents, such as *personalia* describing little Gertrud Fleming's death soon after her father. Gertrud was eight years old when her father died, and the *personalia* explained her

⁶ About *ars moriendi* and Jean Gerson in Sweden, see, for example, Göran Stenberg, *Döden dikterar*; Markus Hagberg, ed., *Jean Gersons Ars moriendi*; About actual service book texts in the sixteenth century, see Matti Parvio, ed., *Manuale seu exequiale Aboense 1522*, (Suomen kirkkohistoriallisen seuran toimituksia) 115 (Helsinki, 1980), pp. 22-50 and 146-52; Stina Fallberg Sundmark, *Sjukbesök och dödsberedelse. Sockenbudet i svensk medeltida och reformatorisk tradition*, (Bibliotheca Theologiae Practicae) 84 (Uppsala 2008), pp. 131-65; Kaisa Häkkinen, ed., *Codex Westh: Westhin koodeksin teksti*, (Wanhän suomen arkisto) 5, (Turku, 2012), pp. 110-18.

⁷ Stenberg, *Döden dikterar*, pp. 145-50; Liisa Lagerstam, *A Noble Life: The Cultural Biography of Gabriel Kurck (1630-1712)*, trans. Susan Sinisalo, (Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniora) 349 (Helsinki, 2007), pp. 195-202.

⁸ Lahtinen, "A Nobleman's Death," p. 40.

⁹ Urbanus Rhegius, *Siellennes tröst och läkedom* (trans. N.N., Stockholm, 1548); Oftestad, "Transforming the Investment in the Afterlife," pp. 106-83; Tarald Rasmussen and Jon Øygarden Flaeten. eds., *Preparing for Death, Remembering the Dead*, (Refo500 Academic Studies) 22 (Göttingen, 2015).

demise by the great sorrow and constant crying for the lost father that led to high fever and, ultimately, to her death.¹⁰

A sudden death, especially a death of close family members, was a shock, then as now. Around the year 1601, the widowed Countess Sigrid Sture (1538-1613) described the agony of her late lamented son, Erik Turesson Bielke (1564-99), in the face of the death of his wife Anna Lewenhaupt (1558-99) and their little son. In an autobiographical poem, underlining the incalculability of the mundane happiness, Sigrid told how her son Erik Bielke was away on a journey while his wife and son unexpectedly died. According to Sigrid, her son came back, eager to meet his family, and had to face the news. "I never saw him happy again," commented the grieving mother the reactions of Erik Bielke, who soon afterwards also died.¹¹

Even shocks of this kind, however, could serve as steps in preparing for death, at least as a reminder for those left behind. In her aforementioned poem Sigrid Sture placed emphasis on her observations of the fickleness of worldly joy brought by wealth or family. She informed that she now placed her hope on the world of hereafter, where true godly love and happiness could be expected to come true.¹² The elderly and ailing Sigrid Sture was preparing for her own death, too. That was, at least, how she presented herself, resigned and already focusing on the afterlife. In her poem, she described herself hoping to be relieved of her sufferings:¹³

I have no hopes for a longer life,
as I am now burdened by both age and sorrow,
many dark things I have gone through during 60 years.
I believe that this worldly suffering
will be compensated with the crown of Glory
redeemed sinless for me
by our Redeemer Jesus Christ.¹⁴

¹⁰ Herman Fleming (1619-73) (and his daughter Gertrud Fleming), *Personalia*, Skoklostersamlingen 1, vol. 74, RA.

¹¹ "[*I*]agh sågh hono: aldri gh seeden gladh", Jan Samuelson, "Att vinna ärans krona: En 1500-talskvinna skriver om sitt liv," in *Tid och tillit: En vänbok till Eva Österberg*, eds. Irene Andersson, Kenneth Johansson, and Marie Lindstedt Cronberg (Stockholm, 2002), pp. 139-63, here p. 150.

¹² Samuelson, "Att vinna ärans krona."

¹³ Original among Sigrid Sture's papers in Bielkesamlingen, *Adliga ätten Bielke*, vol. 9, E 1993, RA; Samuelson, "Att vinna ärans krona," pp. 149-51 and passim.

¹⁴ As quoted in Samuelson, "Att vinna ärans krona," p. 163.

While the process of resignation and *mors beata* focused on the transition to the hereafter, other documents also inform us of the worldlier aspects of preparations. Settling one's economic commitments was a lengthy process; especially when it came to aristocracy, different arrangements were made decades before the death to ensure the division of property and the future of those left behind. In addition, plans for proper funerals and gravestones were made and executed well in advance. The most prominent plans were made by the Royal House: for example, the last will of Gustav I Vasa, King of Sweden (r. 1523-1560), was a paramount manifestation of how he wanted to present himself, guide his sons, and pass on power to his children.¹⁵ Aristocrats could give similar guidelines on their deathbed or in the testament, although on a smaller scale.¹⁶

Baron Henrik Fleming of Lais (1584-1650), for example, gave a detailed plan for his funeral in his last will. Already during his lifetime, he had donated pulpits and other movables to churches that were located near his estates or in ecclesiastic centres of the realm. A gravestone had been prepared for him, a stele in which he was portrayed resting with his first wife, Ebba Bååt (1587-1630). While the Lutheran church no longer organised masses or guaranteed salvation via economic investment, it was imperative for an aristocrat to think of her or his afterlife in the memory of the community. This afterlife was guaranteed by the visibility of the coats of arms and other memorial text and pictures that were placed in the churches to which she or he had given donations.¹⁷ To be remembered by the family and the community was of importance, and while in the pre-Reformation period the family members had been requested to make intercessions to help the dying or dead relative, during the Reformation period more emphasis was put on arranging the funeral.¹⁸

In addition to public image that was considered important for the afterlife, personal items of remembrance were significant in the final farewells between family members. These items were typically rings or other small but valuable private belongings that were essential for defining the post-mortem identity of the deceased and ensuring their commemoration.¹⁹ When bidding farewell

¹⁵ Nils Edén, ed., *Brev av Gustav Vasa: Ett urval* (Stockholm, 1917), pp. 151-65.

¹⁶ See, for example, the plans of father Klas Fleming (of the Manor of Lehtinen) and his son Henrik Fleming in the 1610s and 1640s, as described in Samuel Loenbom, ed., *Uplysningar i Swenska Historien* 1 (Stockholm, 1768), pp. 68-69; Tuija Tuhkanen, *Kirkon kaunistukseksi ja lahjoittajan kunniaksi: Henrik Flemings lahjoitukset Suomen kirkoissa*, (Historiallisia tutkimuksia) 238 (Helsinki, 2008).

¹⁷ Tuhkanen, *Kirkon kaunistukseksi*.

¹⁸ Oftestad, "Transforming the Investment in the Afterlife," pp. 119-20.

¹⁹ J.S.W. Helt, "Women, memory and will-making in Elizabethan England," in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 188-205, here p. 205.

to his sorrowful mother Sigrid Sture, the aforementioned Erik Bielke gave her his pocket watch.²⁰ Gifts were tokens of affection and remembrance. When aristocrat Hogenskild Bielke (1538-1605) made preparations for his execution, having been sentenced to die by beheading for vehement writings against the regent, he gave a touching speech asking for permission to give his daughter the only golden item he owned--a golden ring, a gift from his wife when she was on her deathbed. Hogenskild Bielke's wife Anna Sture (1541-95), in her turn, had received the ring from her brother.²¹

Presents could mediate mixed messages: in the early seventeenth century, when the elderly Baron Nils Gyllenstierna (1526-1601) felt that he would not live very much longer--although his death was not imminent--he sent his daughters a chalice, telling them to drink from it and remember the passion of Christ.²² The somewhat bitter and gloomy tone of the letter might give reason to interpret it as reproach from the side of the elderly father to his daughters--and maybe also as a hidden invitation for reconciliation before the final separation.

Some attention should also be paid to the audience. Who was thought to be the primary receiver of the message? Letters were sent to relatives and could be men but were also intended to be read aloud and copied. For funeral sermons, the primary audience could be the funeral guests, but the choice of words also often reveals that certain important relatives were more on the focus. For example, the funeral sermon and *personalia* of the aforementioned Erik Bielke focuses almost solely on the maternal side of his ancestors, and the relation between the mother and the son. At one point, the text takes a bold excursion to discuss the position of Erik Bielke's uncle, Karl Sture, and Erik almost becomes a minor character in his own funeral. All these details suggest a strong influence from Sigrid Sture's side.²³ As we will see, many other accounts have also been written the mighty female relatives who had been left behind.

²⁰ Helsingius' Likpredikan öfver Erik Bjelke och hans hustru Anna Lejonhufvud [...] 1600 [...], Handskrifter, Biogr.Sv. 1.b. 33, Kungliga biblioteket (The Royal Library of Sweden), Stockholm, Sweden.

²¹ Fridolf Ödberg, *Anteckningar om riksrådet Hogenskild Bielkes friherreskap Leckö (1571-1599)* (Skara, 1892), p. 27. About gifts and remembrance mentioned in this section, see also Anu Lahtinen, "Lahjat ja aatelin suhdeverkostot 1500-luvun Ruotsissa," in *Esine ja aika: Materiaalisen kulttuurin historiaa*, eds. Maija Mäkilä and Riitta Laitinen (Historiallinen Arkisto) 130 (Helsinki, 2010), pp. 34-65.

²² Nils Gyllenstierna's letter to his daughters, 27 Aug. 1601, Skoklostersamlingen II:5, RA.

²³ Helsingius' Likpredikan öfver Erik Bjelke och hans hustru Anna Lejonhufvud [...] 1600 [...] Handskrifter, Biogr.Sv. 1.b. 33, Kungliga biblioteket (The Royal Library of Sweden), Stockholm, Sweden.

Preparations for the Unexpected Death

Given the many hazards and dangers in the early modern world, there were times when circumstances such as sudden illnesses, accidents, war or violence prevented people from even moderately following the course of ideal preparations for death. A person facing sudden illness would rather not face departure without proper farewell of and guidance for those left behind. For example, when Baron Klas Fleming (ca. 1535-97) fell ill while travelling in 1597, he first tried to continue the journey at any cost, hoping to meet his wife for the last time; according to the accounts of his final moments, he would have wanted to pass important information before his demise. Big political decisions were at stake, as Klas Fleming had tried to protect the interests of King Sigismund against Duke Karl of Södermanland (1550-1611, later King Charles IX, r. 1604-11), to the extent of violently suppressing a rebellion in Northern and Central areas of Finland. When it became evident that Klas Fleming would not survive a journey to his wife, he resigned, and did his best to make as good preparations as possible in the short time that was left.²⁴

The description of the last moments of Klas Fleming survives as it is reported by his widow, Baroness Ebba Gustavsdotter Stenbock (d. 1614), who wanted to reject any rumours and speculations about the death of her husband. She had not been present at the moment of her husband's death, but apparently she relied on the accounts of servants on the matter. She sent a description to her sister, Queen Dowager Katarina Stenbock (1535-1621), that follows the pattern of *mors beata*. Baroness Ebba's account admits that something important was missing--the presence of the family. However, the struggle is turned into a relatively successful departure, given the circumstances:

Neither do I doubt that those who did not wish him [Klas Fleming] well during his lifetime would like to spread false rumours of his Christian departure. That is why I humbly want to inform Your Majesty that he departed in the Lord's grace [...] and asked his barber-surgeon, Master Marcus, to read holy texts to him, and entrusted his life and soul to the hands and will of God Almighty, and passed away in a dignified

²⁴ See Richard van Dülmen, *Theater des Schreckens: Gerichtspraxis und Strafrituale in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 1988), pp. 161-79; Lahtinen, "A Nobleman's Death," pp. 36-43

manner, so that I can have consolation of it through all the sorrowful days of my life [...].²⁵

As was taught by Reformatory texts, the pious and righteous people died peacefully, as they could count on salvation by faith.²⁶ Thus, dying peacefully, Klas Fleming proved that he had been pious, and indirectly also provided his political agenda with an additional touch of legitimacy. Ebba's letter was apparently meant to circulate; indeed, it survives as a copy in a collection of copied documents with accounts about the political turmoil of the time.²⁷ The letter also portrays the political and social consequences of the death of an aristocrat. For enemies, a sudden death opened up possibilities for spiteful speculations about the reasons behind the demise, and Klas Fleming had many antagonists. An account of a worthy death, or the lack of it, was an important asset in the political power struggles of the time, and it was important to provide the powerful family members with an account as soon as possible.

As was previously mentioned, Otfried Czaika convincingly argues in this volume that according to the Lutheran funeral sermons, no one died unprepared.²⁸ This idea seems to be present also in the funeral sermon of Countess Elena Bielke (1592-1651), who drowned in 1651 in a shipwreck shortly after she and her party had sailed off from Stockholm. Even four noble young girls, who had been Elena's companions and were educated by her and other elderly female relatives, drowned when the storm wind hit their vessel (Sw. *en Jacht*).²⁹ Luckily, argued the author of Countess Elena's funeral

²⁵ "Twifler och icke att den som honom Vthi hans Lijffztijd missVnthe, något gott efftertaal skole och hans Christelige afgang gerne till thz wärste Vttyde, På det E: M:t Vthi sanning gunsteligen teckes att förnimma hans beskerde Christelige död af Gudj försedd, låter iagh E: M:t her medh ödmiukeligen förnimma Att han Sal: i Gudj afsomp:[ned] [...] begärade han af sin Berdberare b:d M:r Marcus, att han skulle läsa Vthi hans böcker för honom, Och antwardade sigh medh lijf och siel Vthi Gudh thens Alzmechtigestes händer och wilie, och så hugneligh Vpgaf sin Ande, att iagh i alle mine bedröfwede lijfz dagar haf:r att hugna migh vidh", Ebba Stenbock to Queen Katarina, Castle of Turku, 5 June 1597, Kopiokirja 1592–1601 ("Copybook 1592–1601"), 131-32, Kansallisarkisto (National Archives of Finland), Helsinki, Finland. On speculation in connection with Klas Fleming's death, see Anu Lahtinen, *Sopeutuvat, neuvottelevat, kapinalliset: Naiset toimijoina Flemingin sukupiirissä 1470-1620*, (Bibliotheca Historica) 108 (Helsinki, 2007), pp. 73-75.

²⁶ Oftestad, "Transforming the Investment in the Afterlife," pp. 115-17.

²⁷ Anu Lahtinen, "'There's No Friend like a Sister:' Sisterly Relations and the Rhetoric of Sisterhood in the Correspondence of the Aristocratic Stenbock Sisters," in *The Trouble with Ribs: Women, Men and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anu Korhonen and Kate Lowe, *COLLeGIUM: Studies Across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2 (2007), pp. 194-95.

²⁸ See Otfried Czaika's chapter in this volume.

²⁹ See *personalia* of the members of the Fleming family in Skoklostersamlingen I:74, RA; Olavus Laurelius, *Christelige Lijkpredikningar* (Västerås, 1656), pp. 196-203 (page numbers according to those written in the margins of the copy preserved at the Royal Library of Sweden); Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor med tillägg och rättelser* 2 (Stockholm, 1926), pp. 740 and 743; Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor med tillägg och rättelser* 7 (Stockholm, 1932), pp. 210-11.

sermon, these women had prepared their souls (better than their vessel, it seems). The sermon describes, among other things, the pious prayers and songs that had taken place before the ship had embarked on its journey. These songs were typical precautions for people sailing on the troubled waters of the time:³⁰

[...] when it comes to this late lamented Countess's mortal demise from this world, the late lamented Lady had left for and aimed at Norrnäs and Säby, leaving on 17 August the previous year 1651. The very day she and her company (however after saying prayers at dinner time) sailed at night on a yacht, but were hindered by rain and contrary wind and could not make it further off the Customs House at Blockhusudden [at Djurgården outside Stockholm]. The day after, on 18 August, they continued their journey, and after the morning prayers, held by the Court Preacher, including a Sermon and Songs, they went on singing many devout and pious psalms; the late lamented Countess especially entrusted herself to God and under His protection with the Psalm taken from Psalm 31 of David: In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed etc. Seconds later came a gust of wind, and at that very moment the yacht was overturned, so that she along with four young noble maidens in great distress had to part hence.³¹

The sermon text underlined that even before the fateful journey, the 59-year-old Countess had led a pious life, attended church frequently, and held prayers at home. It was even explicitly brought up that she had been preparing for her death all her life and was already looking forward to finding rest for her weary body in a grave, beside her late lamented husband--for a short while before the (according to the sermon) unquestionable resurrection.³² Thus, even though her death was sudden,

³⁰ See, for example, Simon Fischer, ed., "Henrik Normans resa till Erik XIV:s kröning 1561," *Historisk tidskrift* 5 (1885), pp. 259-96.

³¹ "[...] whad thenne Sal. Grefwinnans dödeliga Affgång ifrån thenna Werlden widhkommer / så hade then salige Frw sigh föresatt och ärnat then / 17. Augusti vthi nästförledne Åhr 1651. at förreesa til Nornäas och Säby / och förthenskull begaff sigh medh sitt Medhfylie på samma Dagh (doch effter hållen Böön för Middaghen) emot Afftonen på en Jacht vth på Wägen / men förhindrat aff Regn och Mootwäder / kom intet längre then Afftone än til Tullen widh Blockhuus Vdden. Dagen ther effter som war then 18. Augusti fulfölldes Reesan / och effter hållen aff Hoffpredikanten Morgonböön / medh läsande och siungande / continuerades Sångerna medh många gudelige och andelige Psalmer / i synnerheet befalte then salige Grefwinnan sigh Gudh i Händer / och vnder hans Beskydd och Beskärn / medh then Psalmen taghen aff then 31. Konung Davids Psalm: På tigh hoppas iagh HERre kär / Hielp at iagh ey på Skam kommer / etc. En stund ther effter kom en hastigh och brusande Wäderijling / och i stoor Hastigheet omstörte Jachten / så at hon medh fyra vnga Adelige Jungfrwer vthi en stoor Siönödh / sitt Afskeedh ifrån thenna Werlden tagha motte", Laurelius, *Christelighe Lijkpredikningar*, pp. 201-02.

³² Laurelius, *Christelighe Lijkpredikningar*, pp. 196-203.

the Countess had taken every precaution for such a sudden demise. The autobiographical poems and Reformation guidebooks also make a point of preferring the hereafter and preparing for it.³³ In the Reformation period, it was all the more important to prepare beforehand: unlike during the Catholic period, there was no chance of being saved through suffering in purgatory or through posthumous commemoration by those left behind.³⁴

Preparing for a Violent Death

Sometimes the preparations had to be made in front of a violent death. This was the case with young Baron Johan Fleming, a young man in his early twenties, who became a casualty in the game of thrones of Sweden in November 1599. He was the son of the aforementioned late Baron Klas Fleming, who had been the Admiral and Steward of Finland and Livonia (then parts of the Kingdom of Sweden). Klas Fleming had also been the most vehement antagonist of the Swedish pretender to the throne, the aforementioned Duke Karl of Södermanland, uncle of the reigning King Sigismund (r. 1592-99). Fleming had supported the crowned King Sigismund at all costs. In 1599, his son, Johan Fleming, had to die to atone the deeds of his father.

Having resided in Poland for a long while, Johan Fleming came to Finland to help his imprisoned mother, Ebba Stenbock, and several sisters. He was almost accidentally drawn into the defence of the Castle of Turku against the troops of Duke Karl aiming to finally crush the supporters of King Sigismund in Finland. Although Johan Fleming's contribution was minor, his family name was poison to Duke Karl. Young Johan Fleming had to die; he was sentenced to death and executed at the Turku town square in November 1599, along with many other supporters of King Sigismund.³⁵

A servant later wrote down a description of the last days of Johan Fleming, focusing on the efforts of the young aristocrat preparing for his untimely death. It was sent to the grieving mother, Ebba Stenbock, and was archived and later distributed by Johan's sister Katarina Fleming; clearly, the

³³ Samuelson, "Att vinna Ärans krona"; Anu Lahtinen, "Noudatin vanhempieni tahtoa": Omaelämäkerralliset kirjoitukset 1500-1600-lukujen Pohjolassa," in *Historiallinen elämä: Biografia ja historiantutkimus*, eds. Heini Hakosalo, Seija Jalagin, Marianne Junila, and Heidi Kurvinen, (Historiallinen arkisto) 141 (Helsinki, 2014), pp. 290-313; Oftestad, "Transforming the Investment in the Afterlife," p. 124.

³⁴ Helt, "Women, memory and will-making," pp. 193-94.

³⁵ Eric Anthoni, "Johan Claesson Flemings död: En källkritisk studie," *Historisk tidskrift för Finland* 23 (1938), pp. 89-101.

women were even in this case the primary persons to pass on the account and the tradition. While the account of the death of Johan Fleming is not a formal obituary, it is similar as the contemporary obituaries in the way how it comments on the dignified way of dying. Thus, it illustrates how important the proper process of preparing oneself was for the contemporaries. At first, Johan Fleming requested for reprieve but after it had been denied he accepted the inevitable. Resignation did not mean that he accepted the lawfulness of the sentence given by the earthly court; rather, it meant that he accepted his fate as decreed by God and attempted to focus on the remaining preparations.

When it came to preparing his soul, Johan Fleming reportedly sent for the vicar of the town of Turku,

so that he would be so kind and come on Saturday morning and listen to His Lordship's confession, and to give His Lordship the true passport, that is, the Body and Blood of Holy Christ, on his way to the hereafter where His Lordship now had to go [...].³⁶

Johan Fleming had to think of his eternal soul, but there were also other issues--the treatment of his corpse and the well-being of his mother and sisters, who were still imprisoned by Duke Karl and depended on the last male member of the family. Johan Fleming was concerned of his possibilities of ensuring, if not a beautiful death, at least some dignity in death. The immediate concern was that after execution by sword, his body or head might be displayed at some public place and his corpse be left for food for birds of prey.

Luckily, Johan Fleming managed to get a promise that "no spectacle" would be made of his corpse, so he could then focus on placing an order for his coffin. A special carpet was arranged to the scaffold by a noble female acquaintance. Johan Fleming also made sure that he had some money to give to the executioner so that the executioner could not claim Fleming's clothes as a compensation for his work. Johan Fleming was afraid that the executioner would parade in his clothes during

³⁶ "[A]tt han skulle göra wäl och om Lördagen bittida komma och höra H. H:s Skriftermål, och till att meddela H. Herd. det rätta wäge-passet, som war Christi helga Lekamen och blod, till den långa vägen som H. Herd. gå skulle [...]" Johan Bertilsson's account, "Convol. IV," Acta Historica 1599, Kansallisarkisto (The National Archives of Finland, hereafter KA, Helsinki, Finland), published in Samuel Loenbom, ed., *Anecdoter om namnkunniga och märkwärdiga svenska män I:1* (Stockholm, 1770) p. 20.

carnavalesque festivities, thus disgracing Fleming's family and relatives.³⁷ As a matter of fact, the utmost concern and last request that he presented to his antagonists was that "the executioner would not lay his hands on my clothes, and that my head and my corpse would be saved from having to suffer an indignity after my death".³⁸

As Johan Fleming pointed out in a letter to his mother, his situation was typical for those who face difficult times: friends and helpers were hard to find. In troubled times, however, blood was thicker than water. It was the illegitimate daughter of Klas Fleming, Philippa, and her husband who both brought Johan Fleming food and drink during his imprisonment, and promised to do all they could to arrange an honourable funeral for him. Indeed, after a couple of days, he was buried in the Cathedral of Turku.³⁹

This help was so much valued that Johan, praising the good will of his illegitimate half-sibling--the blood ties were not explicitly acknowledged in his letters--expressed his mother a last wish that she would do all she could make recompense the kindness of Philippa and her husband. Indeed, when Baroness Ebba was on her deathbed in 1614, she in her turn made her daughters promise that they would take care of Philippa and her family. This was precisely what the daughters did, referring to the obligation of the promise they had given at their mother's deathbed. In his final letter to his mother, Johan Fleming was also speculating about the possibility that his illegitimate half-brother Olof Klasson could inherit the name and the coat of arms of the Fleming family as their family branch would otherwise become extinct on the sword side. Olof, however, was also sentenced to death and executed the same day with his noble half-brother.⁴⁰

Along with assurances of his bravery in the face of death, Johan Fleming sent a ring to his mother saying that he was ready to die like an old and tired man. Like the last token and the last letter, the last greetings of Johan Fleming were to his mother, to be delivered by his faithful servant: "Tell her that I entrusted her to God Almighty, I hope He will be the consolation for my Heart's Dear Mother with her cross"⁴¹. The property of those who were sentenced to death for treason was confiscated so

³⁷ Gullan Gerward, *Majgrevefesten: En kulturhistorisk analys* (Stockholm, 1996), pp. 50-54.

³⁸ "[A]tt Bödeln icke måtte beställa något med mina kläder, och att med mitt hufwud eller kropp icke måtte blifwa brukat något spektakel efter min död." Johan Bertilsson's account, in Loenbom, ed., *Anecdoter*, p. 27.

³⁹ Johan Bertilsson's account, in Loenbom, ed., *Anecdoter*, pp. 15-19; about the burial, Reinhold Hausen, ed., *Bidrag till Åbo stads historia 1* (Helsinki 1884), p. 156.

⁴⁰ Ibidem. See also Lahtinen, "A Nobleman's Death," pp. 37-43.

⁴¹ Johan Bertilsson's account, in Loenbom, ed., *Anecdoter*, p. 29.

there was not much else to be sent to the grieving mother; but even if there had been something, small personal belongings were important tokens of commemoration.

Praying continued when the sentenced walked to the scaffold, and the servant described Johan Fleming

consoling himself with the Word of God, and where the Priest could not console him, there he consoled the Priest, so that even though it was tragic and more than sorrowful that it would so happen, still the consolation that he received himself and gave to others was very dignifying to listen to. [...] And all whom he met and who saw him, he greeted with a happy tone and voice [...] so that all who heard it, cried and lamented because of his innocent death.⁴²

What were the consoling words that a priest could offer to a person who was about to be executed? According to the service book, a person sentenced to death was guided to think of the crucified malefactors by the side of Jesus Christ, and how the other one was saved. The priest also placed emphasis on the fact that God Almighty had the power to change everything and that His will could still be that the malefactor would be saved; moreover, if an innocent was sentenced to death, God would see his innocence and save his soul.⁴³

When Johan Fleming had come to the scaffold he was reported to have tried to give a speech to defend himself but was interrupted by the supporters of Duke Karl. After some arguing, according to the account, Johan Fleming and his opponents both agreed that it was best to leave the final judgement in God's hands. Johan Fleming said that he was himself confident that he was not going to face a final death but rather the eternal life; thus, he presented the Lutheran faith on salvation, a sign of a pious person facing his death. As final preparation, Johan Fleming told his servant to give some coins to the poor in accordance with the Christian tradition and went bravely to his death.⁴⁴ As I have argued in another context, the show of piety and self-command were as such resistance

⁴² "[...] och tröstade sig med GUDs Ord [...] och hwad icke Prästen kunde trösta honom, så tröstade han Prästen, så att ändock det war bedröfwerligt och mer än sorgeligt, att så skulle tillgå, doch war hans tröst som han sig sjelf och andra med tröstade ganska hugnelig att höra uppå, [...] Och alla de honom mötte och sågo på honom, ropade han till med glad stämman och röst," Johan Bertilsson's account, in Loenbom, ed., *Anecdoter*, p. 28.

⁴³ An example of the guidelines for consoling a person waiting for execution, Kaisa Häkkinen, ed., *Codex Westh*, pp. 110-18.

⁴⁴ Johan Bertilsson's account, in Loenbom, ed., *Anecdoter*, p. 28.

against the sentence: bearing the spectacle with fortitude could work against the intended defamation and question the righteousness of the sentence, and the sentenced person could make himself look rather like an innocent saint, following the path of the Christ.⁴⁵

Johan Fleming was not the only one who suffered a violent death during the turmoil of Swedish power struggles in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. In 1600, five aristocrats faced their death at scaffold in Linköping, more or less proven to have conspired against Duke Charles. They were likewise reported to have gone to meet their maker uttering pious psalms, giving fearless last speeches, and facing the final blow with grace.⁴⁶ Among the sentenced ones was Baron Gustav Banér (1547-1600), whose daughter later described to another sister, how her father did his best to prepare for his death and create a counter-narrative of commemoration against the accusations and the death sentence that had tainted his reputation. Gustav Banér is described spending the last days fondly embracing his wife, discussing the future of their children, reading the Psalms, especially verse 71:7, “I am as a wonder unto many; but thou art my strong refuge”, and finally being consoled by meeting several bishops. His daughter also recalled her father saying that he did not want his children to be ashamed of the name of his father. Neither, however, did he want them to seek for revenge; while he was convinced of his innocence, he left the final sentence in the hands of the God Almighty.⁴⁷

Rings, pendants, and books given as remembrance by those sentenced to death by Duke Karl in the 1590s and 1600s survive to this day; among them are the pendant and some books given away by Baron Gustav Banér. Some items were to be sent to family members who could not be present during the final days. In the prayer book, Gustav Banér wrote notes on his sorrowful death.⁴⁸ These

⁴⁵ Margarita Stocker, *Judith: Sexual warrior, women and power in western culture* (Yale, 1998), p. 98; Lahtinen, “A Nobleman’s Death,” pp. 41-43; James M. Boyden, “The worst death becomes a good death: the passion of Don Rodrigo Calderón,” in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge 2000), pp. 259-65.

⁴⁶ H. Almquist, “Sten Axelsson Banér,” in *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon* [hereafter *SBL*] 2 (Stockholm, 1920), p. 640; H. Almquist, “Gustav Axelsson Banér,” in *SBL* 2 (Stockholm, 1920), p. 647; Tor Berg, “Ture Bielke,” in *SBL* 4 (Stockholm, 1924), p. 210; Bo Eriksson Janbrink, “Erik Sparre,” in *SBL* 32, (Stockholm, 2003-06), p. 725.

⁴⁷ “Jungfru Christina [sic! Anna] Banérs Skrifwelse til sin Syster, angående deras Faders Riksmarsken Gust. Banérs bedröfliga öden, ifrån Stångebro Slaget 1598 til dess afgång i Linköping 1600,” published in Bengt Bergius, ed., *Konung Carl den IX:des Rim-Chrönika, Samt Konung Gustaf Adolfs Påbegynte Chrönika, Egenhändigt af Högbemälte Konungar Författade; Jämte Bilagor Af 96 Bref och Handlingar til föregående Chrönikors och Tidehwarfs uplysning* (Stockholm 1759), pp. 348-65. About the identification of the author, see Sven Ulric Palme, “Två berättande källor om Linköpings riksdag,” *Historisk Tidskrift* 56 (1936), pp. 280-93. On the number of the psalm, see C.M. Stenbock, “En klagelig dag,” *Personhistorisk tidskrift* 18 (1916) pp. 237-38.

⁴⁸ Stenbock, “En klagelig dag,” pp. 229-38.

remembrances, along with personal letters and final words to family members, allowed more private and devoted remembrance of the sentenced whose image in public memory was tainted by the death sentence for treason. Even the right to spend the final moments together with family members was a valuable moment to cherish afterwards. When documenting the last days of her father, Anna Banér put emphasis on the tender embraces and tears of her parents as they tried to give courage to each other, and their gratefulness for having been able to meet during the imprisonment. The account ends in a final tragedy, however, when the wives were prevented from following their husbands to the scaffold; it can be supposed that the cries of wives and children would not have benefited Duke Karl in his political agenda.⁴⁹

The descriptions of the final moments of Johan Fleming, Hogenskild Bielke, and Gustav Banér were certainly based on what had been seen by eye-witnesses. At the same time, the account was also a narrated interpretation and, as such, very similar to other accounts from other parts of Europe, such as the account of the final days of the Spanish aristocrat Don Rodrigo Calderón in the 1620s. His story also went on from the resignation of a sentenced aristocrat to his way to the scaffold, from the description of the weeping audience to the final moments of bravery.⁵⁰ The cause for the similarities must be both by common understanding of how one should prepare for one's death and how these preparations should be described. The accounts then served several purposes: it was a testimony of how an aristocrat's preparations for death presented his piety, his bravery, and his innocence--and his dedication to his family and their survival. According to the account, he went to meet his Maker after having done what he could for the best for his family and dependents.

Conclusion: Pious and Mundane Agendas

For early modern nobility, accounts of preparations for death were, for sure, ways to communicate devotion and set examples of pious last moments. Rhetorically speaking, the earthly world was referred to as the valley of misery. Worldly fortunes were fickle and for a devout person, it was good to leave this life for eternal joy, as the way had already been prepared by pious life, as in the case of Elena Bielke.

⁴⁹ "Jungfru Christina [sic! Anna] Banérs Skrifwelse," pp. 280-93; Anne Banér and Eva Sparre, eds., *Fasans tider: Historia och öden kring Linköpings blodbad år 1600* (Linköping 2000), pp. 82-84.

⁵⁰ Boyden, "The worst death becomes a good death," pp. 240-65.

However, one could not leave the world without giving some thought to those left behind. Some plans and preparations were made years earlier, in last wills or via attempts to follow a pious lifestyle. In some cases, however, plans were altered quickly and a *mors beata* had to be improvised as well as one could in suddenly emerging circumstances. The future of the children or siblings had to be thought, and it was a great consolation if the closest family members had the chance to spend the last moments together. Either way, there were economic matters to be settled, tokens to be given as final greetings from the dying person; and one could not just leave without searching for some consolation of self-defence, as was the case of the Swedish aristocrats, already facing the scaffold. Written accounts served also as political assets for family members, often female relatives, who were left behind to defend and cherish the honour of the family.

As described above, the accounts of preparation could be formulated to actively defend the reputation and image of the deceased. The posthumous reputation had consequences for those left behind, especially when they were aristocrats whose every step was scrutinized by their peers. It was emotionally important for grieving family members to have a worthy memory of the deceased, such as the memory of the last moments of Klas Fleming, his son Johan Fleming or Gustav Banér. These memories were also something that could be used for political purposes, to support family traditions, and to question the prevailing interpretations. While *personalia* and other accounts focused on the preparations for afterlife, more attention should be paid to the worldly agendas that were also promoted under cover of devotion.