

Dance of Death

**Staging and performing in the
burial culture of Swedish
seventeenth century.**

**Case study of the funeral of Axel
Oxenstierna**

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Wishes and preparations

This paper is the first case study in my dissertation, which focus on the early modern Swedish funeral culture and it's modes of expressing social rank and identity. This is done by interpreting the machinery surrounding the funeral, from wishes and preparations in the deceased's testament, through the funeral ceremonies and the surviving monuments, in order to understand the semiotic language and cultural categories through which the social body of the dead derived its meaning.

The "the social body" is for me a most central analytical tool, which was introduced by Nigel Llewellyn for understanding the dead's prolonged being through the body which was constructed by the surviving community. I do although broaden this view from Llewellyn's focus on tombs and funerary monuments to also include the funerary ceremonies and its cultural expressions in order to understand the language of the funeral culture. The body thus became a mirror of social categories and social relations through which the body received meaning and power, ultimately making it into an instrument for the surviving community to understand order and identity.

When the Chancellor of the Realm Count Axel Oxenstierna died the on 24th August 1654, his body became the subject of an array of cultural expressions. Through different stages in the early modern funeral culture the body came not only to mirror the life of the deceased, but also ideas of social relations, order, aristocratic culture and ultimately early modern society.

In his 14 sheet testament, which had been written four years prior to his death in 1650, Oxenstierna gave detailed instructions of how the funeral was to be executed.¹ After the introducing prayer to the salvation of his soul and that God may save and guard the realm, church and his family, the instructions of his worldly body became the first topic of how the world should treat his heritage.² He commanded that his body was to be buried in the newly made tomb in the church Jäder which lied on his estate Fiholm, wherein his blessed parents, wife, children and some of his sibilings were already resting. He implores his heirs that they shall bury him without delay, with befitting ceremonies to both religion and rank, without grand pomp or new funeral inventions as was contemporaneously fashionable. His coffin should be made of oak and dressed with black textile, without any silver or gold decorations following the fashion of his parents, wife, sibilings and children. The textile of the catafalque should preferably be the same as the one used at his wife's funeral. His coffin was to be placed between his blessed father and wife in the tomb, where also many of his family rested.³ The old gravestone of his parents had been erected in this new tomb when they were placed there, and Oxenstierna implored his children to

¹ Oxenstierna Axel (1888) p 662

² Ibid p 634f

³ Oxenstierna (1888) p 635

complete the inscriptions on this old stone since the eight ancestry heraldry as his mother's name and dates were not inscribed on the gravestone.⁴

Further, Oxenstierna explained how he has honoured his parents, siblings and children with three epitaphs of marble and alabaster, along with an epitaph to commemorate himself and his wife. If these were not completed or fully paid for after his demise, he implores his children to supervise their completion, so that ancestors and posterity may be honoured and remembered in a Christian fashion.⁵

Pompa funebris

Already on the 31st of August Oxenstierna's body was placed in St Jakob's church in Stockholm.⁶ In the account of the Church it says that in the autumn of 1654 the bells of St Jacob tolled 4 times for his grace the Count and Chancellor of the Realm Axel Oxenstierna, at a cost of 12 daler.⁷

Nearly six and a half months after he had been placed in St Jacob the funeral ceremonies were performed, most probably in wait for the Diet to be gathered in Stockholm.⁸ On the 18th of March the burial ceremony at Cathedral of Stockholm was performed with grandeur and pomp.⁹ At the funeral service the bells of the cathedral tolled 8 times at a cost of 80 daler. This was a great manifestation of sound hearkening that a nobleman was being buried. If a comparison is made between different bells tolling between individuals of different rank it is evident that only the nobility were able to afford or were allowed to get the 8 bell tolling.¹⁰

According to the priest Emporagrius's preaching at the funeral service, 16 crests were present to enforce the heritage of Oxenstierna, as a member of an old dynasty which had carried out great and honourable services for the realm.¹¹ These crests were carried in the procession along with the master crest and most likely funeral flags and county banners, stating Oxenstierna's titles, aristocratic rank and ancient dynasty.¹² Alongside the master crest and 16 crests of heritage and sorrow banners there were probably two or four separated banners – county

⁴ Ibid 636

⁵ Oxenstierna (1888) p 636, Flodin (1989) p 151

⁶ Starbäck (1886) p 27. X279(UUB)

⁷ Stockholms stadsarkiv. Jakob och Johannes kyrkoarkiv. Huvudböcker och verifikationer L1a/10 "För 4 ringningar för hans Grefwliga nådh RiksCantzlären Axel Oxenstierna 12:-"

⁸ The Diet had commenced on the 12 of Mars. Wallenstedt (1995) p 221. Wetterberg (2002) p 979. Ekeblad (1911) p 392

⁹ Rosenhane (1995) p 139, Ekeblad (1911) p 392, Palmsköld 43 (UUB) s 337

¹⁰ Stockholms stadsarkiv. Storkyrkoförsamlingens kyrkoarkiv – Kyrkoräkenskaper äldre serie L I a 1/2I

¹¹ Emporagrius (1655) p 94

¹² Corswant-Naumburg (1999) p 286, Candreus (2008) p 49, 213. "Kongl. May:ts Stadga och Påbudh öfwer åtshskillige Oordningars affskaffande inrotade uthi Adelige Samqwämer/ Morgongåfwor och Klädedrächter" (17/12 1644), in Stiernman (1760)

banners/länspfana – which stated Oxenstierna’s aristocratic titles as Count, Lord and Baron.¹³

The coffin was made of oak and dressed with black textiles and embroideries. On the top of the coffin was a crucifix and “1654” in white silk embroidered, on the head end the monogram of Christ “IHS” and on the foot end a skull. On the long side was the heraldry of the families Oxenstierna and Bielke – the parents of Oxenstierna – embroidered and surrounded by the letters stating the name of the deceased, his titles as count, baron, member of the council, and Chancellor of the Realm.

The body was dressed in a red-brownish ankle-length velvet dress, velvet jack boots, gloves and a calotte.¹⁴ The coffin was carried by the nobility and escorted in procession by the majesty, princes, the council of the realm and the estates were present at a large number, further proving the rank of the late Count and Chancellor.¹⁵

In the printed version of the funeral preaching to Oxenstierna, the fifty-three page long *Vita Defuncti* – about a third of the whole preaching– dictated his political deeds and piousness and dedication to God and Christianity during his life. In the preaching his merit, rank and schooling was emphasized alongside his birth, defining him not only as a family father, but as a highborn member of one of the oldest and most noble families in the country, a family which had held the office of cabinet ministers uninterrupted during five hundred years of loyal service. Such a statement did not only emphasize Oxenstierna’s individual skill as chancellor of the realm, but also a skill inherited by birth. He was held as a great example of virtuous living, a man who was always righteous, and held grand piousness and honour to God, Christianity and the sacraments. His working zeal was compared to the different chancellors which figured in the Bible, stating the solemnity and gravity of the office as well as embodying these biblical examples into the being of Oxenstierna, as a great gift from God who had saved the fatherland during a period of great clamour.¹⁶ The text clearly states that his virtues, qualities and gifts to God, country, king, noble and common brethren alike were so grand that they were not only known to the fatherland but to the whole world.¹⁷ It is beyond doubt that the commemoration of Oxenstierna was held as a great example of a virtuous living in the preaching, of a man who had worked to the benefits of

¹³ Candreus (2002) p 49. Adlersparre (1793) p 191. According to Candreus it seems that it was only the noble titles which were presented on the county banners. Although considering how often the title of Chancellor of the realm was connected to Axel Oxenstierna in the coffin, epitaphs, as well as in the accounts describing the funeral, it would not be surprising if a separate banner was made for presenting that title, raising the possible merit banner to somewhere between 2-5.

¹⁴ Flodin (1989) p 164f

¹⁵ Palmsköld 423(Emporagrius, Eric Gabrielsson (1655). *Christeligh lijkpredikan ... uthi Stockholms Doomkyrka, på thet åhret Christi M. DC. LV. then XVIII. martii, tå ... Axel Oxenstierna, grefwe til Södre-Möre ... begroffs, bleff hållen aff Erico Gab. Emporagrio*). Rosenhane (1995) p 139

¹⁶ The phrase *Fosterland* is repeatedly used as well as describing Oxenstierna as a patriot.

¹⁷ Ibid

the realm and to God, who after a lifetime of hard work had been bestowed with the great gift of being released from the clutches of the earthly world and embraced into the kingdom of heaven.

The sources are rather lean on information describing Oxenstierna's funeral, so contextualization with other sources which explain the conduct is essential.

Along with the attributes working as individual representation – crests, flags, members of the procession – was a rider in the deceased's armour – sometimes gilded – on the horse of the late nobleman, which was to work as a living representation but also as an image of the dead's knightly rank.¹⁸ (see pic 1). These different individual attributes spoke of the deceased's social standing, merit and birth, but an even greater mediator of this is to behold the procession from afar, to see the structure and what it mediates. During the funeral of Oxenstierna's brother Gabriel Oxenstierna in 1640 the presence of the military was grand. Cannons were firing salute from the Royal Castle, twice when the corps appeared from the church and twice when the procession reached the southern city gate. When the body had been placed in the tomb at the deceased's estate twelve salutes was fired from cannons – which had been brought along – as well as three salutes from the Royal guard and two from the regiment of Uppland.¹⁹ At the funeral procession of Count Torstensson in 1651 the procession was led by trumpets and drums, and was followed by officers, two companies of Cuirassiers, over 100 banners taken from the enemy, four companies from the Royal guard, both musketeers and pikeeners and at the very end of the procession 232 great cannons which were to twice fire a salute.²⁰ In between these military blocks were the banners and crests, coffin, the armoured rider, noble guests as well as priests and burghers.²¹

By looking at a contemporary map of Stockholm it is possible to make a qualified guess of how the procession moved, from St. Jakobs church, via the central bridges, past the Royal Castle and ending at the cathedral (see pic 2). This was a route which moved through the very core of Stockholm, claiming prestige and control of the city's social and symbolic landscape, by privatizing the social space through the visualising of funeral procession and its different categories like stating rank, kinship and power. Through the processions' movement in the Royal capital it created a link not only to the city but also to different areas and buildings stating social

¹⁸ Adlersparre (1793) p 191, Johan Sasse's kopperstick över Karl Karlsson Gyllenhielms procession in till Strängnäs 1651 KB. Johan Sasse's kopperstick över Johan Casimir procession in till Strängnäs 1652 KB. Lagerholm (1965) p 20ff. "*Kongl. May:ts Stadga och Påbudh öfwer åtshskillige Oordningars affskaffande inrotade uthi Adelige Samqwämer/ Morgongåfwor och Klädedrächter*" (17/12 1644), in Stiernman (1760)

¹⁹ Adlersparre (1793) p 190

²⁰ Lünig (1720) p 561

²¹ Adlersparre (1793) p 191ff, Rosenhane (1995) p 139. Johan Sasse's kopperstick över Karl Karlsson Gyllenhielms procession in till Strängnäs 1651 KB. Johan Sasse's kopperstick över Johan Casimir procession in till Strängnäs 1652 KB

network, patronage, family and dominance.²²

A funeral was not at all cheap business. The account books of the heirs to Axel Oxenstierna tells of a loan that had been made for the funeral of 12,000 Daler, all which seems to have been paid for within seven and a half years after the funeral, as well as other loans of 1,500 and 1,200 daler²³. This gives a hint of what sort of financial arrangements that surrounded an aristocratic funeral, although how much money was spent in total is hard to estimate. In an extract of the testament of Oxenstierna he states that the expenses for the funeral shall be paid for by the income of the decedent estate, until any loans were to be taken.²⁴ That loans may have been taken in order to pay other loans further aggravates the calculation of the total sum. Considering funeral expenses of other aristocrats, it is not at all odd that a sum beyond 12,000 daler should be spent on the funeral of Oxenstierna. The funeral of the Marshal of the Realm Lars Kagg in 1662 was estimated beyond 15,000 daler, and for the Marshal of the Realm Jakob De la Gardie in 1652 the bill for his funeral came to 24,000 daler.²⁵ If adding the loans and expenses in the account books, estimated cost of the crest and banners from other funerals at the same time, not counting missing specifications as costs of coffin, embalming and clothing, the cost ends at 17,437 daler.²⁶ Compared to the surviving accounts of other noble funerals, this calculated guess of Oxenstierna's funeral gives a suggestion of the cost and pomp surrounding his own funeral.

The surviving body

After the funeral the body was moved, probably in a procession, to Chancellor Oxenstierna's manor church Jäder, where the body was laid to rest in the family tomb.²⁷ From the 1620's Oxenstierna had been upgrading the church in his manor parish to a grand grave monument commemorating his dynasty.²⁸ Since the body was laid in the fundament of the church under the high choir, the church in itself became the monument of him and his dynasty.

The interior of the church clearly stated that this was a dynasty church, mainly by the epitaphs that Oxenstierna had commissioned in the spring of 1648 to an expected cost of 3,600 Riksdaler. The epitaphs all follow an architectonical schedule as well as a themed structure of dynasty and birth through heraldry, education through humanistic virtues and individual deeds and virtues

²² Strocchia (1992) p 19f

²³ Riksarkivet Tidö 42. The loan seems to have been made by the heir to the cabinet minister Conrad von Falkenberg, where a payment is later registered, as to a Johan Hamel.

²⁴ Riksarkivet Tidö 42

²⁵ Ekeblad (1915) 308, Corswant-Naumburg (1999) p 70f

²⁶ Loans 14 700, crests 400, funeral banners 1128, shroud 420, bell tolling 92 and 700 for other funeral related services. Tidö 42. Candreus (2002) p 170. Corswant-Naumburg (1999) p 133. Considering that a funeral cost could amount between 15 000-30 000 daler copper coin nearly 30 years later, this seems to be a rather good lower level to estimate the costs of Axel Oxenstierna's funeral.

²⁷ Diarium Gyllenianum (1888) p 190ff

²⁸ Flodin Barbro (1989) p 70, 92f

through praising text, which conveys firm mutuality between them.²⁹ Through these epitaphs Oxenstierna is mainly viewed as a member of an ancient dynasty, as a family father, brother and husband, but also as a Count and Chancellor, a title which is stated alongside his own name as the erector of the epitaphs.³⁰

The importance of dynasty and aristocratic rank was further enforced by the crests and the funeral banners in the church, at the high choir, both commemorating but also setting an example of heritage to the descendants (see pic 3).³¹

The whole interior of the church commemorates the family of Oxenstierna and Axel Oxenstierna in particular, due to his reconstruction of the church but also because his merit commemorated him as a recognized person.³² His person and dynasty was further emphasized in the exterior, where a doublet of his county crest together at the top of the facade of both the church porch and the vestry. On the exterior of the high choir reside the crests of the dynasty of Oxenstierna and of Bååt, the latter the dynasty of Axel Oxenstierna's wife. The church as mediator of the connection to estate and county enhanced the view of the Oxenstierna's belonging to a certain place and soil within the realm. The burial church thus worked as a mediator between body and soil, belonging and ownership, and ultimately identity of both the dynasty and surrounding community, charging the landscape with social order.³³

Conclusion

The social body of Oxenstierna derived its meaning from the same social and cultural institutions which he arguably had derived meaning and identity from during his life as a member of the aristocracy. His funeral, which was attended by the political and social elite gathered in Stockholm for the Diet, the procession through the heart of the capitol and his dynasty tomb at the estate church, gave through an array of established institutions meaning to the social body of the dead, which in turn mirrored these institutions of the funeral culture and contemporary society to the beholders. Categories such as Christianity, war, merit, birth, dynasty and social network were powerfully displayed through the use of crests, banners, epitaphs, the rider, and the presence of the royalty, dignitaries and military. With the use of salutes from the Royal Castle, canons and royal regiments as well as trumpets, drums, bell tolling, preaching and the supposed way of the procession, the arrangements claimed the public room as well as the visual room and soundscape, forcing the surrounding to acclaim the social body and the institutions it mirrored.

²⁹ Flodin (1989) p 151ff

³⁰ The carvings on his epitaph seem to be something which was not accomplished until 1750 by the Axel Gabriel Oxenstierna. Flodin (1989) p 154-159. Lindahl (1969) p 155f.

³¹ Candreus (2008) 181f. Dahlberg (1856) Vol 2: p 20. Engström (2013) p 70f. Verdery (1999) p 32

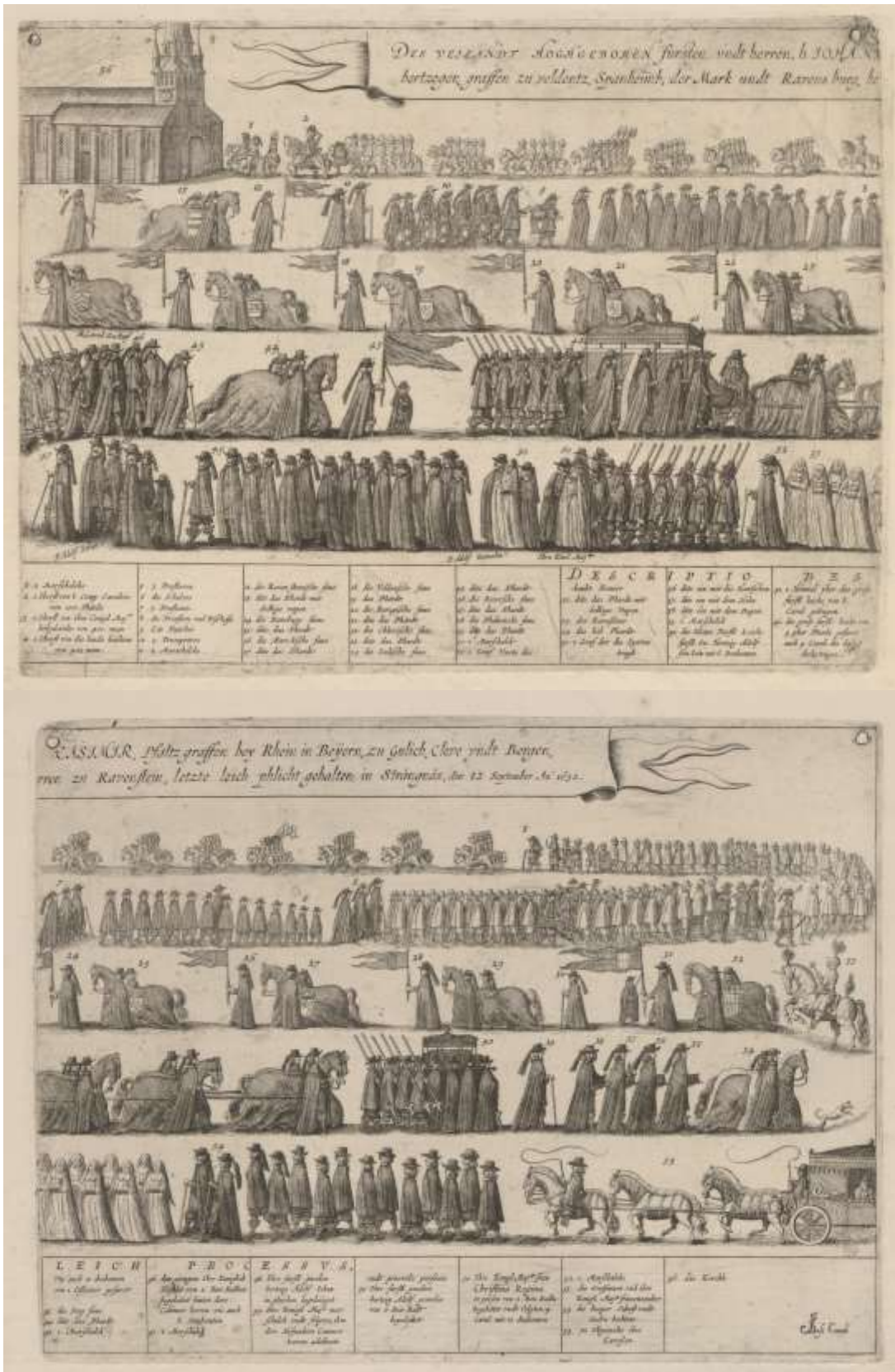
³² Candreus (2008) p179. Corswant-Naumburg (1999) p 25f, 58. Lindahl (1969) p 147

³³ Eriksson (2002) 248. Verdery (1999) p 5, 6, 106, 108f

By emphasizing Oxenstierna's knightly and grand claim, merit and rank, ancient birth and dynasty, kinship to the aristocracy, government and crown, piousness and Christian virtues and stating a significant claim between body and the estate soil through his estate church, the social body of Axel Oxenstierna became an instrument to convey aristocratic virtues and identities, as well as framing the structure of social order and meaning of community to its surrounding.³⁴

³⁴ Verdery (1999) p 34, 108ff

Picture appendix: Picture 1



The burial procession of the Pfalzcount Johan Casimir and his grandson, to the cathedral of Strängnäs in 1650. Copperplate by Johan Sass. KB (Royal Library).

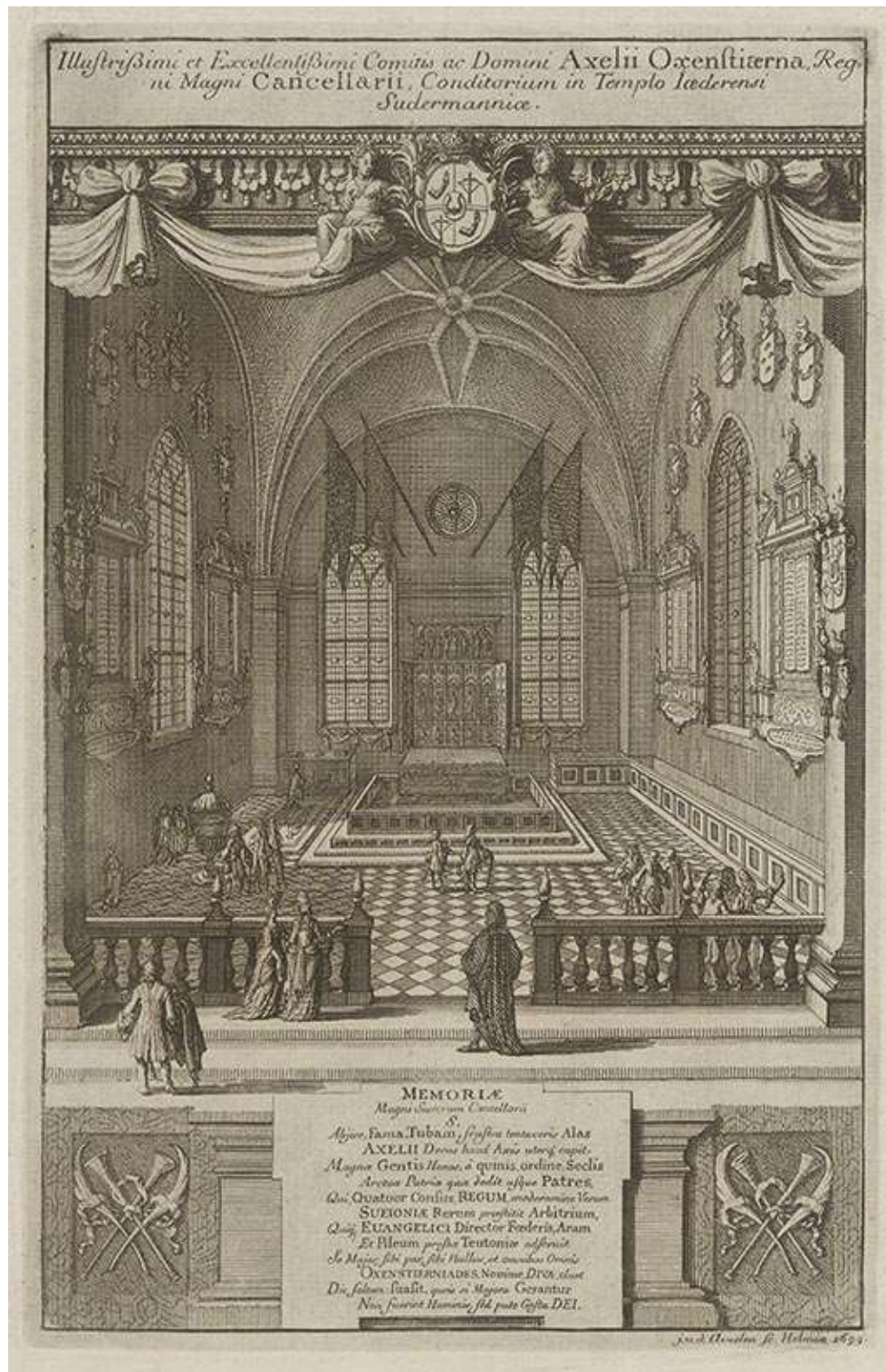
Picture 2



Stockholm Cappitale de Suède 1650. Unknown maker. Stockholms stadsmuseum.

With notes from the author of this paper to mark places of importance of the spatial movement of the funeral of Axel Oxenstierna 1655.

Picture 3



The church of Jäder. Copperplate by Johan van den Aveelen in Eric Dahlberg's *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna* (1698). KB (Royal Library). Eight funeral crests on top of each side of the arches showing the birth and dynasty, under those the four epitaphs in marble and alabaster commissioned by Axel Oxenstierna in 1648. To the left the burial stone in white marble of his parents and at the high choir four funeral banners.