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Birth, baptism, and churching

The start of a new life is important
– how was this handled in the old days?

BY INGELA MARTENIUS

Our present notions about what occasions in life are worthy of special attention may differ a little from our ancestors' – but that the beginning of a new life should be celebrated is something that we probably all can agree on. Today baptism has lost some of its status, even though about 70% of all children born in Sweden are in fact still baptized within the Church of Sweden. In the old days baptism was perhaps the most important ceremony in your entire life since it meant that you were made part of the Christian congregation and were thus protected from the many dangers our ancestors were absolutely convinced threatened the newborn, not yet christened child, while we today often tend to see the baptism as more of a naming ceremony.

The heathen child

Today children in Sweden are often baptized when they are several months old, but in the old days baptism was something that had to be performed as quickly as was humanly possible. Until 1864 the law required a child to be baptized within eight days, but most children were baptized earlier. If it could be arranged, the child was baptized the very day it was born, but most commonly the baptism took place when the child was two or three days old.

A child that was not christened was

a danger both to itself and to others; it was e.g., believed that *trolls* were on the lookout for pretty little human babies – they were thought capable of exchanging their own ugly, stupid, and wayward brat for the cute little child. *Changeling* and *as if changed* were not said jokingly or figuratively in those days! For the protection of the child different things were put in the cradle: it could be a small pouch of spices (e.g., caraway), a steel knife, or a silver coin.

For a very long time baptisms were carried out only in church, but in the end it became fashionable to have children baptized at home.

In old churches it can also be observed that the baptismal font is not placed by the altar but at the entrance or even in the vestry. The reason was that the child was considered heathen before it was baptized, and a heathen should not be allowed into the church or at least as short a distance as possible.

If the child was very weak, or if the weather made it impossible to bring the child to church, an emergency baptism (*nöddop*) had to be performed. Every baptized member of the Church of Sweden could and still can perform an emergency baptism. The baptism is quite valid, and needs only to be confirmed through a blessing, but the rural population generally did not think that it “took” properly if it was not done by a clergyman – so the vicar simply had

to repeat the baptism. Accordingly “double” baptismal dates can sometimes be observed in the church records. In some parishes it was so common that the children could not be baptized during the winter that you can tell which the first Sunday with clement weather was: then upwards of twenty children were baptized – for the second time – on the same Sunday. It is easy to imagine the level of noise in that church!

Churching (*kyrktagning*)

One aspect we have difficulty comprehending today is that the mother was not present at her child's baptism. After giving birth, the woman had to stay indoors – preferably in the room where she had been delivered – until she was churched (*kyrktagen*). All her chores were done by neighbouring women; this was the only time in her life a woman could rest properly! Sometimes the women held a feast for the newly delivered mother, a “birthing beer” (*barnsängsöl*), with extra nourishing food made from fresh milk, or even cream, and eggs.

A mother not yet churched was according to popular belief thought “unclean” and on par with a heathen, and both she and the farm with all who lived there, both human and animal, were in danger. Since the churching originated within the Jewish faith and there was regarded as a purification – and the Virgin



*A typical baptism from rural Skåne; the child in a red, decorated "bag." From the dress show at Ystad, 2005.
Photo: Ingela Martenius*

Mary was received and purified at the Temple 40 days after giving birth to Christ (celebrated as Candlemas (*Kyndelsmäss*) on Feb. 2nd) – less educated people (which meant at least 90% of the Swedish population) continued to regard churching as a purifying rite while the Swedish Lutheran Church, at least officially, emphasized that the ceremony was one of joy and gratitude that the newly delivered mother could return to the congregation healthy and with regained strength. Churching was supposed to take place 40 days after the delivery – to conform to the precedent set by the Virgin Mary – but in practice early on it often took place on the fourth Sunday (i.e., 22-27 days) after the delivery. In 1866

churching was also officially moved to four weeks after the birth.

Churching was originally performed at the church door. This was however changed during Protestant times, among other things because it was not thought to be good for the newly delivered mother to stand around outside if it was cold, windy, or wet (which it so often is in Sweden). Having the churching outside the church would of course also have strengthened the superstitious idea the Lutheran church wished to get rid off, namely that it was a purification rite.

The churching ritual was very simple: before the regular church service began, the woman about to be churchied kneeled before the altar

and the vicar read a short prayer expressing thankfulness. The woman rose and the vicar shook her hand, at the same time saying "The Lord guide you in His truth and fear, now and unto eternity. Amen." The woman then returned to her pew.

Unmarried mothers were originally not churchied but had to publicly confess and apologize for their transgression in front of the entire congregation, but later the confession was made in private before the vicar. A modified form of churching then took place: a slightly different prayer was said, and the vicar did not shake hands with the unwed mother. Usually she was also made to kneel on the bare floor - or at least on an uncovered stool - while the married

woman kneeled on a very plush and finely decorated stool.

Since baptism from 1864 was permitted to take place within six weeks of the birth and churching was officially moved to within four weeks of the birth in 1866, this meant that churching and baptism could take place at the same time – which also very quickly became the norm.

In Sweden churching was still in the Book of Prayers until 1986 (with the name changed to “a mother’s thanksgiving”), but was seldom performed – and then mainly on request from the mother. The province preserving churching the longest was of course Bohuslän (the province on the coast just north of Göteborg), the most conservative province when it comes to church matters.

Godparents

The most important persons at a baptism – except for the child – were instead the godparents. They were often four: a married and an unmarried man, a married and an unmarried woman. In our church records they were most often called *testes*, i.e., “witnesses” in Latin, and are not seldom more carefully inscribed than the parents!

It was the business of the entire extended family to provide as influential godparents as possible for the newborn child and many genealogists are today amazed that “common crofter kids” could have e.g., the richest farmer in the parish as a godfather. Godparents did not – as many believe today – have any sort of obligation to care for the child, if the parents were unable to do so, but they had a moral duty to further the child’s interest, e.g., by giving recommendations when it later applied for a position or to be accepted by a guild or a school, and also to give gifts. A smart way of acquiring nice godparents was to ask the wife of one of the most important parishioners to carry the baby (called the *susceptrix*, or *barnabärserska*); this was a very great honor, irrespective of the woman’s and the child’s social positions, and such a request could hardly be turned down. Since the mother was not present, the primary godmother in a very real sense represented the mother.

Godparents – and the entire extended family – were expected to give valuable christening gifts. A silver spoon, often engraved, is still today given in connection with birth or bap-

tism; it is a remnant of the old rural society where all the money that could be saved was quickly invested in silver, preferably a spoon, which had the double advantage of being of lasting value and also could be shown to neighbors, family, and friends. Today such a gift of a silver spoon would correspond to, e.g., opening a savings account in the child’s name – but it is difficult to abandon old traditions completely, so most of us continue to give a baptismal spoon while we at the same time make a deposit in that savings account! The christening gifts were given at the feast held in connection with the baptism, the “child beer” (*barnsöl*).

Swaddling and clothes

Most people are aware that children used to be swaddled. Two different swaddling techniques were used: *cross-swaddling*, which was done rather loosely with a narrow swaddling-band so that the child could not kick off its clothes, and *circular swaddling*, which was done tightly with a broad band so that the child’s limb would become straight. The child was usually nursed only twice in 24 hours, morning and evening, and spent the rest of the time swaddled in its own dirt!

From the 17th century some doctors, philosophers, and pedagogues (e.g. John Locke [1632-1704], Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1712-78]) however, spoke out against swaddling, saying that children should be able to move freely. There were however some advantages to swaddling: since the child could not move it could easily be minded by a gouty old granny or a sibling – or even be left alone; the child was also kept warm in the draughty cottages of the time and could not kick off its blankets, etc.

Until it was three or four months old the child was completely swaddled from head to toe, but after that “only” from the breast down. From about the age of 10 months – when the child would begin to learn to walk – there was no swaddling during the daytime. Swaddling was abandoned



Two typical birth / baptismal spoons. They are perfect for babies and later in life they are just as perfect for the breakfast marmalade. Photo: Ingela Martenius



Baptism in an upper middle class setting in the 1950's. The mother wears a "nice" dress, but in a dark colour. Photo: Gefa/Ingela Martenius.

How to dress today if you wish to use your Swedish national costume for a baptism

If there are no specific local instructions you should dress as if for a grand occasion; however, not quite as fancy and festive as for a wedding – a baptism is somewhat more “serious.” Presumably no one would today even for a moment consider swaddling a baby even temporarily, but a “bag” does work also without swaddling. However, a white baptismal gown was used also when people dressed in national dresses “for real,” and works well. A somewhat more old-fashioned style is achieved if a cap, particularly one cut after the old patterns, is used with the baptismal dress.

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first by the English aristocracy (already at the beginning of the 18th century) and from there the new custom spread both geographically and socially. From the beginning of the 20th century babies were swaddled hardly anywhere in Sweden, but there is plenty of evidence that it was still done in Eastern Europe until well into the 1960's and 1970's!

Except for the swaddling bands – which for long remained transformed into a belly band – baby clothing has not changed all that much, other than that babies today seldom wear a cap indoors. In the old days you could tell from the very first day if it was a boy or a girl from the cut of the baby's cap: the girl's cap was cut with two side pieces and a central piece from forehead to neck while the boy's cap was made from “wedges” (*kilar*) – both were however tied under the chin. Among the rural population no distinction was made as to the colors worn by boys and girls, and there was no concept of dressing children in colors different from those used by adults. The tradition of pale pastel colors with pink for girls and (light) blue for boys started only quite

late in the latter half of the 19th century and was purely a city fashion.

For its baptism the child was dressed as finely as could be achieved. Special baptismal gowns were common also among the rural population. In, e.g., Hälsingland and Skåne are mentioned in particular red baptismal gowns, in silk with embroideries and decorated with silk ribbons, pearls, and lace. The baptismal gown was most often in the shape of a “bag,” which was necessary if the child was completely swaddled. The baptismal dresses common today have sleeves which presupposed that the child was swaddled no higher than the chest. Such baptismal dresses – in white – became the fashion from the end of the 18th century and became the general norm during the 19th century. Particularly fancy caps, e.g., in silk, were worn before and after the baptismal act.



The Värend (Småland) festivity costume.