



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Blood is thicker than baptismal water: A late medieval perinatal burial in a small household chest

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Abstract

The interment of stillborn infants in later medieval burial grounds stands at odds with Catholic Church Law, which forbade the inclusion of unbaptised children within consecrated ground. When perinatal remains occur within graveyards, their interpretation can be problematic. Did they live to be baptised, or do such examples represent clandestine burials? Historical documents indicate that some parents disobeyed the Church and secretly buried their offspring within consecrated ground. Proving such actions in the archaeological record, however, is another matter. This paper therefore investigates the discovery of a perinatal burial (Sk953) within a rural graveyard at Poulton in Cheshire, England, placed in a small household box. A multifaceted approach was used to interpret the varying strands of evidence. These comprised church law, the birth, container, orientation of the corpse, local topography, date of burial, and status of the graveyard when the infant was interred. The authors interpret the evidence as characteristic of a clandestine burial, and a rare expression of grief and love visible in the archaeological record.

KEYWORDS

Britain, Cheshire, later medieval, infant baptism, clandestine burial, grief, love

1 | INTRODUCTION

The bioarchaeology of fetuses has traditionally been under-emphasised in academic research (Halcrow et al. 2017, p. 83). This marginalisation reflected interpretations of attitudes to infant death in past societies. High mortality rates were seen as the cause of parental detachment from their offspring, caring little when they died. The apparent marginalisation of infants within mortuary contexts supported this hypothesis (Ibid, 99). Over the past 20 years, however, infant death has been subject to reinterpretation through an 'archaeology of grief' (Gowland, 2020, p. 266). An extensive review of this growing field has been published by Halcrow et al. (2017), who

highlighted a diverse range of topics where foetal studies can make significant contributions. Examples include population demographics, disease, and the reconstruction of social identity through burial practices. This reappraisal has been hampered by issues still pertinent within bioarchaeology. Significant numbers of unpublished excavations limit the dataset, as does the tendency to ignore children under five in demographic research as they are deemed underrepresented in graveyard populations (Halcrow et al., 2017, pp. 83 and 95). The potential for studies of parental grief, however, are exemplified in Murphy's (2011) reinterpretation of unbaptised infant burial grounds in Ireland. The substantial corpus of published excavations enabled her to identify individual acts of care in burial treatment and

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memorialisation, contradicting dominant interpretations that such children were of little consequence to their families.

Within the context of the archaeology of grief, this article presents the case study of a perinatal burial placed in a small household chest (Sk953), uncovered during the excavation of a late medieval chapel in Poulton, Cheshire, England.

The initial section reviews Roman Catholic burial practices and attitudes towards unbaptised infants throughout the Medieval Period. The historical record is further discussed to investigate whether the rules were adhered to, or if responses were varied on a localised basis. The next section provides a background to the Poulton graveyard. The discovery and osteological analysis of Sk953 are then presented. In the discussion, a multifaceted approach is utilised for interpretation, combining the varying lines of evidence to reconstruct the events and motives surrounding the interment, and conclusion that this was a clandestine burial.

2 | INFANT BURIAL IN LATE MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Any archaeologist excavating a late medieval Christian burial ground (ca. 1220–1500; Hadley, 2001, p. 42) in Western Europe has a wealth of historical, theoretical, and practical research to draw upon when interpreting their results. Within this widely studied discipline, religious attitudes to death and the treatment of unbaptised infants were widely recorded in medieval literature. This is primarily due to the strict laws enforced by the Catholic Church from the 12th century onwards (Crawford, 2011, p. 77; O'Sullivan, 2013, p. 259). Burial practices were overwhelmingly homogeneous, with the general population interred within churchyards without any form of grave good (Daniell, 1997, p. 148–53); the body placed in a west–east alignment within a coffin or shroud (Dawson, 2014, p. 30). The prerequisite for interment within consecrated ground was baptism, which inducted individuals into the Church for life (Penny-Mason & Gowland, 2014, p. 170). What then, would happen to infants who were stillborn or died before this rite could be carried out?

Childbirth was a dangerous time for mother and infant during the Medieval Period (Daniell, 1997, p. 108), with estimates of up to 100 deaths per 1000 live births (Crawford, 1999, p. 57; Gardela & Duma, 2013, p. 326). The prospect of stillbirth was an ever-present threat. In response, the spiritual well-being of the expectant mother was of great concern, being taken care of by confession and receipt of the Eucharist (Shahar, 1990, p. 32). The eternal dangers for the unborn child were, however, far greater. Even though stillborn infants could accrue no burden on their soul through intentional acts, the Catholic Church taught that all humans were tainted with the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. The only absolution came through baptism, which purified the soul (Wasyliw, 2008, p. 47–8).

Attitudes towards the unbaptised varied through time, with the fourth century Christian writer St. Augustine condemning stillborn infants to eternal hellfire (Gilchrist, 2012, p. 21; Shahar, 1990, p. 45). By the 13th century, however, spiritual punishment had softened in

line with the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. Such individuals were still denied entry to Heaven, but no longer suffered the tortures of Hell. Instead, they were consigned to Limbo (*limbus infantium*), a fate characterised as 'darkness without pain'. Although more humane than damnation, it was still viewed negatively in late medieval society (Garattini, 2007, p. 194; Gilchrist, 2012, pp. 21–22; Ossesterwijk, 2018, p. 590; Shahar, 1990, p. 45–52). By retaining the taint of Original Sin, infant corpses were thought vulnerable to demonic attack; perceived as fearful objects that might return from the dead (Gilchrist, 2012, pp. 219–220; Shahar, 1990, p. 51–2).

Medieval society was so concerned with the fate of the unbaptised (Gilchrist, 2012, p. 185) that the Church introduced regulations in the 13th century to minimise their exclusion from consecrated ground. If the survival of a baby was uncertain, it became the duty of any layperson to baptise (*in articulo mortis*). Baptism in the womb was prohibited (Hausmair, 2017, p. 213; Orme, 2001, p. 124), but any emerging limb would enable the ceremony to be conducted (Charrier & Clavandier, 2019, p. 194; Hausmair, 2017, pp. 211–213; Shahar, 1990, p. 49). The rules regarding the correct use of the words were strictly enforced. Confirmation of the validity of emergency baptism would depend on the clergy, with their judgement based on the testimonies of persons present. If the rites were deemed to have been incorrectly recited, were unnecessary, or administered to a dead child, the baptism was declared void (Hausmair, 2017, p. 213).

Inevitably, some infants were stillborn and therefore could not be welcomed into the Christian community (Gardela & Duma, 2013, p. 326). Catholic Church Law (Canon 1239) dictated that the unbaptised were strictly prohibited from burial in consecrated ground (Donnelly & Murphy, 2008, p. 212; Woywod, 1957, II, p. 51). They were instead treated in the same manner as the excommunicated, murderers, and suicides (Gilchrist, 2012, p. 6; Orme, 2001, pp. 118–124). This led to unbaptised infants being buried in unconsecrated areas, for instance, outside the fences of churchyards, or beneath the floors of houses (Garattini, 2007, p. 194; Gilchrist, 2012, pp. 6, 21–22). Parents were thus left with the horrifying prospect that their infants would be separated both physically and spiritually from the rest of the community dead (Charrier & Clavandier, 2019, p. 193; Hausmair, 2017, p. 211).

The problem that therefore presents itself is how to identify clandestine burials in an active church. Tarlow (2000, p. 713) has argued that archaeologists need to incorporate emotional values and understandings in their research. The main issue with such an approach is that '*Baptism is not an archaeologically identifiable rite ...*' (Crawford, 1999, p. 87). How then, can we prove that a perinate did not live long enough to be baptised? The recent discovery of one such infant at Poulton, Cheshire, is so unusual that it has been interpreted not only as a clandestine burial, but an act of defiance to Church Law, primarily driven by grief and love.

3 | THE POULTON RESEARCH PROJECT

The settlement of Poulton, Cheshire, is located ~8 km south of Chester (Figure 1) and has long been associated with a lost Cistercian

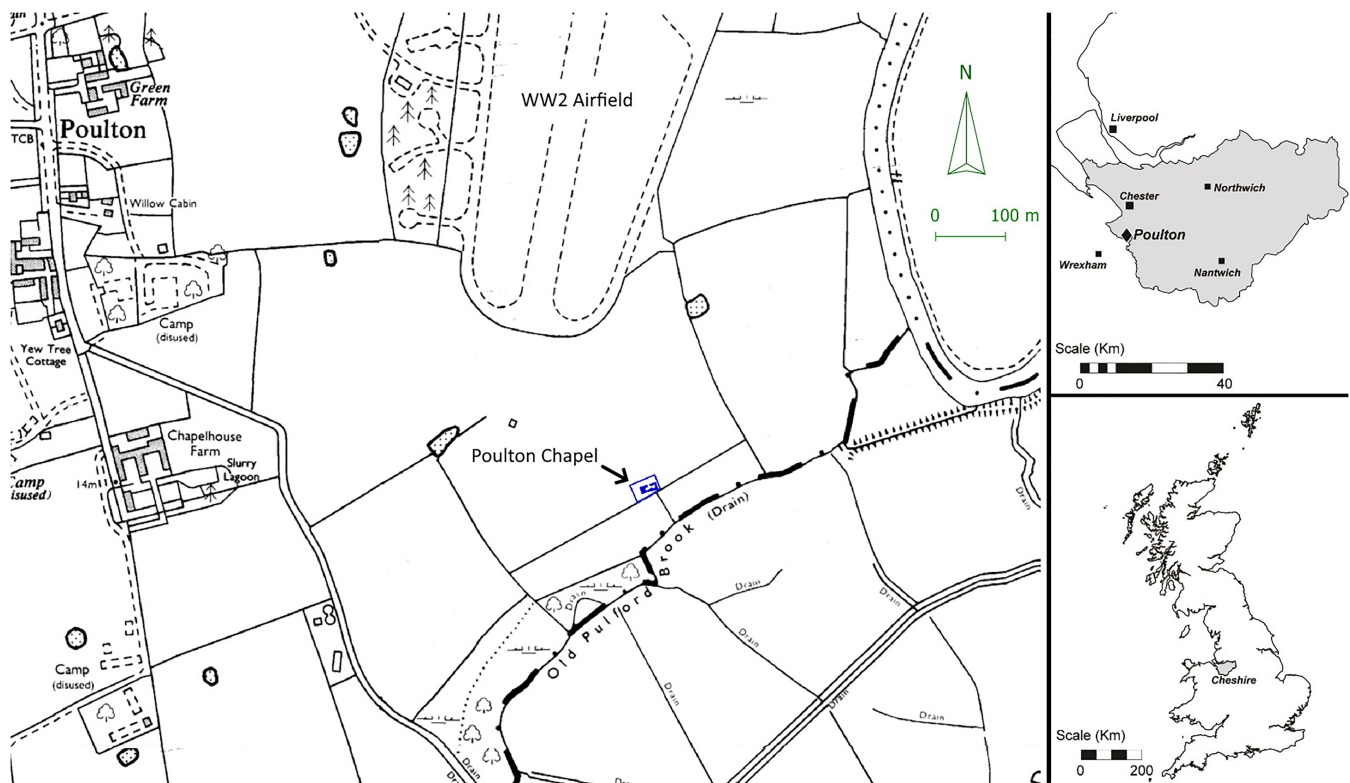


FIGURE 1 Site location [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Abbey. Historic charters record a foundation date of circa 1146–1158, and relocation to Staffordshire circa 1214–1220 (Duggan & Greenslade, 1970, p. 230; Emery et al., 1996, p. 8; Ormerod, 1882, p. ii 861). A chapel continued to serve Cistercian interests in the village, the earliest mention being in 1250 (Emery et al., 1996, p. 9–12, 60).

The chapel foundations were identified during the 1960s. The topographical location of the structure is striking, being sited near the edge of a prominent plateau, where the land drops ~10 m south to the surrounding floodplain (Figures 2 and 3) (Emery et al., 1996, p. 3). The change in slope has been interpreted as the boundary of the adjoining graveyard. In contrast, the land is relatively uniform to the north, east, and west, with the consecrated area delineated by ditches, an arrangement recorded in the pre-1675 Grosvenor Estate map. The structure would therefore have formed a prominent marker in the landscape, especially when viewed from the floodplain. A second substantial building was illustrated immediately north of the chapel and may have formed a tithe-barn. Documentary evidence indicates that settlement was dispersed but primarily located several hundred metres to the north and north-west of the chapel (Ibid. 10–12, 60).

The burial ground associated with Poulton Chapel has been subject to systematic archaeological investigation, with 826 skeletons so far recovered (see Figure 4). The graveyard is typical of the later Medieval Period, being primarily used for the interment of the local farming laity. The overwhelming majority follow the standard pattern for Christian burial, being laid out in simple earth cut graves (Gilchrist, 2012, p. 200), on a west–east alignment in multiple rows.

There is no evidence for grave markers or zoning according to age or sex. Radiocarbon dates and ceramic finds demonstrate active use from the 13th–15th centuries.

Analysis of the graveyard population has demonstrated ~20% died between birth and 4 years old. Only six of these were perinatal or neonatal (0.73%), ranging from 35 to 40 weeks in utero (including Sk953) (Phillip, personal communications). No evidence of special treatment was recorded for the other five examples, which were randomly scattered throughout the excavated areas of the graveyard.

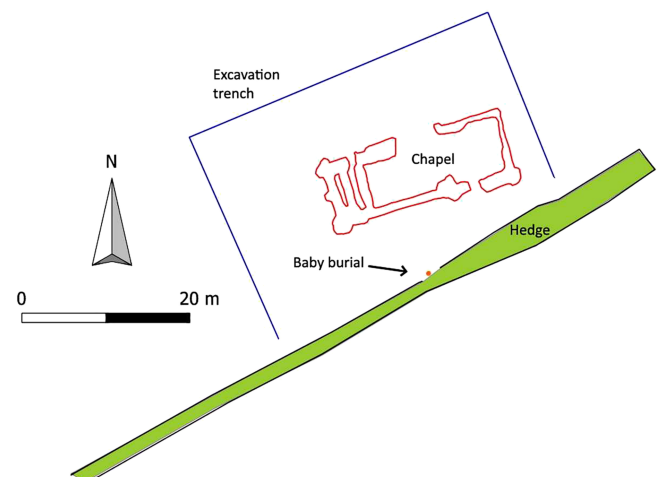


FIGURE 2 Chapel and proximity to hedge and edge of plateau [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 3 Plateau and floodplain [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

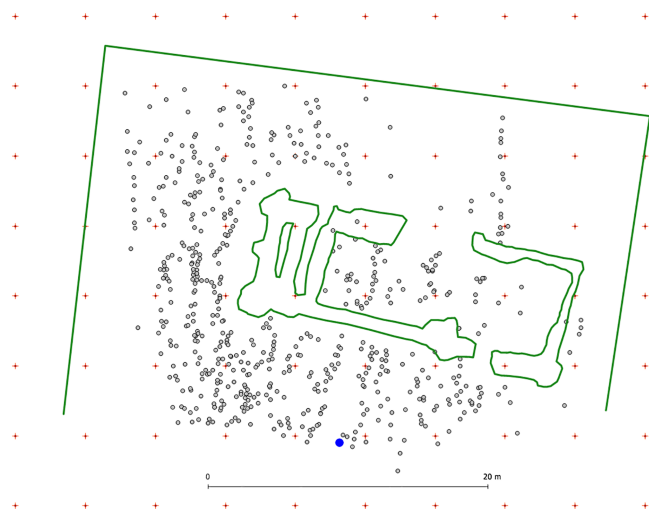


FIGURE 4 Plan of burials showing location perinate in blue [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

4 | SKELETON 953

In 2018, archaeological investigations of the southern portion of the graveyard revealed Sk953, an articulated infant interment. The remains were located 1 m north of the plateau edge at a similar level to the surrounding burials. Of the six perinates excavated to date, this was the only example located near the plateau edge.

The skeleton was quickly identified as being that of a perinate, carefully placed on its right side in a west-east orientation. The legs were flexed, and arms raised as if mimicking the sleeping position (Figure 5). Further excavation revealed a corroded iron plate with copper-alloy attachment (Figure 6), a corner bracket, and the heads of several decorated nails spread across the remains. The layout indicated that the infant had been interred inside a small box or chest with an estimated length of ~0.60 m. The burial was 'block lifted' for micro-excavation under controlled conditions.

X-Ray of the corroded plate identified a locking mechanism with keyhole and hooks from the spring and/or staple elements. During micro-excavation, a small collection of box components were recovered (Figure 7). Analysis revealed iron nails or studs from decorative and/or structural elements of a relatively plain box. The decorative



FIGURE 5 Perinate burial [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 6 Back of iron lock with copper alloy bracket [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

iron strap fittings were comparable to medieval examples from London (Brenan, 1998, numbers 181 and 194). Mineralised wood adhering to two nails identified the box as being constructed from oak. The bracket comprised the remains of a mounted lock, with iron faceplate and inner copper-alloy key-guard, the latter indicating an addition/repair to a box which may have been old when used for burial (Egan, 1998:103–108; Goodall, 2011:235–236).

Approximately 70% of a complete late-prenatal/perinatal skeleton was recovered during the micro-excavation of the block-lifted burial. The right shoulder, upper spine and jaw are missing, having been truncated by tree roots which, in combination with the clay fill, caused weathering and compaction of the cranial vault and facial bones. Amongst those parts with only minimal damage are the separate pre- and post-sphenoid (with fused lesser wings), components of the right and left temporals, and both pars lateralis of the cranial base. Additionally, fragments of a deciduous upper first molar and the partly formed crown of an upper lateral incisor were recovered loose in the vicinity of the head. Surviving elements of the post-cranium include 29 unfused arches of 14 vertebrae, seven vertebral bodies, 19 ribs, a left clavicle and scapula, and a partial pelvis. Of the 11 surviving long bones, good preservation of lower limb diaphyses permitted metrical assessment.

Skeletal age at death was estimated at around the 35th gestational week. This estimate is the averaged results of linear regression equations specific to the femur (maximum length, 64.5 mm) and tibia

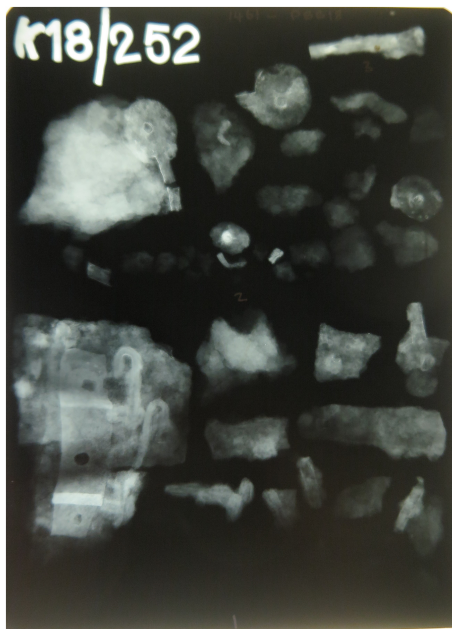


FIGURE 7 X-ray of metallic box components [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(maximum length, 55.5 mm) (Scheuer et al., 1980) which produced a range of 33–37 weeks. Likewise, when the maximum length of the fibula was compared to the dry bone measurements of a modern foetal sample, it corresponded with those aged between 34 and 36 gestational weeks (Fazekas & Kosa, 1978). Further comparisons with the basi-cranium produced correspondence with individuals between 32 and 38 pre-natal weeks; the dimensions of the pars lateralis (length, 21 mm; width, 12 mm) are comparable with those individuals within the age range of 34–38 weeks *in utero*, and the pars petrosa (length, 30 mm) to those within the 32- to 34-weeks range. Additionally, the developmental states of the sphenoid and tympanic plates of the temporal bones correspond with descriptions of foetuses in the later stages of pregnancy (Anson et al., 1955; Garcia-Mancuso et al., 2016; Humphrey & Scheuer, 2006; Schaefer et al., 2009).

Notably, death estimates based on skeletal growth are estimates of *skeletal age*, which may not always reflect *chronological age*. Maternal factors, such as health, ethnicity, age, and parity affect the rate of offspring development (Adair, 2004) causing variation in skeletal growth between populations, and between individuals within a population. Variation in the latter may arise when maternal experiences of disease or undernutrition cause foetal growth to decelerate, resulting in a failure by the foetus to reach its full-growth potential. The development of the dentition, however, is less liable to fluctuate in response to environmental/maternal adversity, providing material with which chronological age may be better estimated (Lewis, 2007), and skeletal growth disruption may be highlighted. The formation states of the lower lateral incisor ($Cr_{1/2}$) and upper second molar (C_{co}) of Sk953 (following Moorrees et al., 1963) are observed in individuals of 32 gestational weeks up to around the 39th week (AlQahtani et al., 2010). This overlaps with skeletal age, leaving margin for the estimate to be pushed towards its upper limit of 38 weeks *in utero*,

without significant growth disruption. No obvious signs of disease or trauma were detected during the macroscopic examination.

A single bone (rib 5 left side) was selected for radiocarbon analysis. This yielded a date of cal. AD 1307–1421 at 2σ (SUERC-82086. $569 \pm 26BP$), confirming that the perinate was interred in the Poulton graveyard at the height of its use.

5 | DISCUSSION

The interpretation of Sk953 faces one fundamental issue; that no direct comparisons in later medieval Britain or farther afield have been identified. With these factors in mind, how does the Poulton example compare with the established burial record of the Medieval and early post-Medieval Periods?

Cases of burials in domestic chests with iron fittings occurred in Anglo-Saxon England but were exclusively for adults (Craig-Atkins, 2014, p. 107; Hadley, 2001, pp. 99–100; Hall & Whyman, 1996). In comparison, ‘woven basket’ burials containing infants are rare but contemporary with the Poulton example. Where found, for instance at St Mary Stratford Langthorne, or the church of St Mary, Spital (Gilchrist & Sloane, 2005, p. 77; Thomas et al., 1997, p. 69,122–3), there is no evidence to suggest the infants were unbaptised.

The scenario of Sk953 being the product of a clandestine burial can, therefore, be supported by combining seven avenues of evidence. These comprise the birth, burial container, orientation of the corpse, Catholic Church law, local topography, date of burial, and status of the graveyard during the 14th/15th centuries.

Dealing with each piece of evidence in turn, the initial question is whether the baby was stillborn or lived long enough to be baptised? There is no definitive answer, but we can deal in probabilities. What can be stated is that within the margin of error for age estimation, development had reached a stage that could be deemed viable for a successful birth (Lewis, 2007, p. 84). This individual was still, however, born before the typical 40 weeks, and the health of the mother is another possible contributing factor that cannot be established. What can be ascertained is that death occurred around the time of birth. It is therefore probable that the infant was either stillborn or died before emergency baptism could be administered, especially considering the events that followed.

The defining piece of evidence regarding Sk953 is the container within which it was interred, namely the small oak box with lock, backplate, and fittings. Herrer's (2003) analysis of the peasant *domus* in late medieval Castile noted that wooden chests of all sizes were an essential piece of household furniture. The most valuable ones, however, were constructed of oak and incorporated locking mechanisms (Herrer, 2003, p. 469,484), as in the Poulton example. To the laity such an item would have had significant monetary if not sentimental value, supported by the lock repair with the addition of a copper alloy backplate. To use such a valuable item as an ‘ad hoc’ coffin would not have been done without thought, but its size would have made it ideal for the task of carrying a perinate. The corpse of this infant must

therefore have held greater value than the box it was contained within. The antiquity of the item may even have added to the sentimentality of the task. If it had been passed down through the generations, it may have held memories of ancestors already buried in the community graveyard.

In addition to the use of a valuable box as container, the placement of the body indicates care and forethought were given to its eternal fate. The burial of young children on their sides with legs flexed and arms placed near the head is an established practice in late medieval Britain. Numerous examples can be quoted, for instance, two infants in the cemetery of Perth Blackfriars (Bowler & Hall, 1995, p. 943), or a child buried with an adult female in Holyrood Abbey, Edinburgh (Bain, 1998, p. 1054). At St Mary Bredin, Canterbury, the skeleton of a neonate had been placed on its side with legs slightly flexed. The corpse had been wrapped within a shroud (possibly from its christening) and placed in a coffin, indicating baptism had been successfully conducted (Blockley, Blockley, Blockley, Frere, & Stow, 1995, p. 391). This deviation occurs so infrequently in adults that it has been interpreted as the intentional act of mimicking the sleeping position (Gilchrist & Sloane, 2005, pp. 155–56).

Whilst the placement of Sk953 in the sleeping position can be interpreted as an act of tenderness, care was also taken in its orientation, with the body laid out west–east. This would indicate that consideration had been given to Christian beliefs regarding resurrection, in direct contradiction to Church teachings regarding Limbo. The person who buried this child wanted to believe that one day they would be resurrected with the rest of the community dead.

Murphy's (2011) reinterpretation of post-medieval Cillini provides supporting evidence for high levels of care often shown in perinatal burials. These sites were approved resting places for unbaptised infants in Irish Catholic society. They were primarily located in desolate areas such as deserted churches and megalithic tombs, traditionally interpreted as physical manifestations of the liminal status of the deceased, who were of little consequence to the family once buried. By analysing the archaeological record, oral history, and parental accounts in modern Western society, the trauma of child loss was identified through visible expressions of care and grief. The demarcation of individual burials attested to the desire to visit graves. The siting of Cillini were reinterpreted as utilising established sacred areas which were protected from disturbance. Oral history further recorded entire communities participating in the funeral, with similar ceremonies conducted to those interred in consecrated ground (Murphy, 2011, p. 409–24).

The use of Cillini's differ from the Poulton example as Catholic teachings regarding burial were adhered to. What they have in common is to illustrate that family members cared and grieved deeply for their unbaptised children. Even in poor communities' time and effort was invested to provide a proper burial in the appropriate place, in a similar fashion to consecrated ceremonies (Ibid).

Turning to the burial of the unbaptised perinate within the Poulton graveyard, such an act would be in direct disregard of Church Law, which was unambiguous in such matters. Historical documents, however, demonstrate the implementation of this rule at the local

level was far from uniform. A direct example is found in documentary records for Hereford Cathedral. In 1389 the Dean and Chapter was granted a royal license to construct boundary walls and gates which could be locked at night, partially to prevent clandestine burials of unbaptised children (Shoesmith, 1980, p. 344; Orme, 2001, p. 126). Similarly, a church prosecution in London in 1493 recorded how a midwife named Alice Wanten ordered Agnes Code to bury her child illegally in the churchyard of St Nicholas in the Shambles (Orme, 2001, p. 126). Such activities continued well into the nineteenth century, where there is an abundance of records for clandestine burial. Even in a time of high infant mortality (up to 220 deaths per 1000 live births) poorer members of society went to extreme lengths to improvise a respectable burial for the unbaptised in consecrated ground. The use of soapboxes as cheap containers for the corpse, sympathetic gravediggers placing infants in the coffins of unrelated adults, and clandestine burials by the family are well attested (Strange, 2005, p. 239–243).

Archaeological support for clandestine burial has been found regularly, but their interpretation can be ambiguous. Eaves-drip burials occur from the early Medieval Period onward, whereby perinate and neonates were clustered around the northern walls of a church. The dominant interpretation is that water falling from the roof provided posthumous baptism (Boddington, 1996, p. 55; Crawford, 1999, p. 85–9; Hadley, 2001, p. 109) but are based upon nineteenth-century folk-myth (Wilson, 2000, p. 216). Illicit forms of burial also tend to occur after the church has gone out of general use (Craig-Atkins, 2014, p. 107; Page, 2011, p. 108). At St Georg/Göttweig, Austria, clandestine burial has been reasonably established but not in an active graveyard. At this church site, the remains of 36 perinates and neonates were the only occupants of an area not consecrated for burial. They were clustered within the southern enclosure ditch, overlooking a prominent plateau. Although similar in topographical setting to Poulton Chapel and an act defiant of Church law, the author interpreted their siting as a memorial to villagers living below and within visible range of the site (Hausmair, 2017, pp. 223–230). More convincing examples of clandestine burial in active cemeteries occur when women who died in childbirth were buried with their stillborn babies, for example in the friary churches at Hartlepool and Hull, where the infant was interred within the mother's coffin (Gilchrist, 2012, pp. 209–210; Gilchrist & Sloane, 2005, p. 72).

Within this palimpsest of burial practices, how does the Poulton example compare? The low number of six perinates within the graveyard indicates that the unbaptised were excluded. Of these six interments, Sk953 was the least developed and sole example to deviate from normal burial treatment. The others were laid out extended on their backs in a west–east orientation, indicating they survived to undergo baptism. The position of the burial near the southern edge of the plateau can further be explained by considering local topography. Any approach from the north, east, or west would have been impeded by boundary ditches and a possible second structure. The relatively flat landscape would have made the gravedigger highly visible from the dispersed settlement located to the north and north–west. By approaching the graveyard from the floodplain under cover of

darkness, the plateau would have afforded natural cover to secretly bury the infant just within its limits.

The final two pieces of evidence; the date of burial and status of the graveyard during the 14th/15th centuries complement each other. The radiocarbon date of AD 1307–1421 for Sk953 confirms that the interment happened when the graveyard was in active use for burial of the local farming community.

With the overall information combined, a secure interpretation can be reached. Before this conclusion, however, the primary motivator behind the burial of Sk953 is illustrated through Gowland's (2020) investigation of the mother-infant nexus. This work explored the close biological relationship through maternal loss, and its applications for archaeological interpretation. Instead of viewing the foetus as the passive recipient of nutrients, the bi-directional exchange of cells before and after birth was highlighted. This incremental and close relationship was characterised by the physical and social development of the foetus, marked by a series of transitions and cultural rites of passage. When a child was stillborn, all future hopes were lost to a mother who still bore the physical signs of pregnancy. Not only did she have to deal with this devastating loss, but also the trauma of her child's exclusions from heaven and consecrated ground. The care and attention placed into burial may have acted as a substitute for this lost future, serving as an outlet for grief and initiating healing of ruptured maternal boundaries (Gowland, 2020, p. 257–70). Within the historical context of Roman Catholic law, this maternal trauma is interpreted as the driving force which set the chain of events in motion.

6 | CONCLUSION

Sometime during the 14th or early 15th century, a female at Poulton gave birth to a baby that was either stillborn or died before emergency baptism could be conducted. Instead of burying the child outside consecrated ground as Church Law demanded, grief drove family members to take a different course of action. The small corpse was placed in an old but valuable oak box, laying the infant tenderly on its side for eternal rest. Probably waiting for cover of darkness, they approached the graveyard from the floodplain unseen. At the top of the plateau they buried the infant just within the limits of the graveyard, taking special care to place the box in the correct orientation to ensure a successful resurrection at the Day of Judgement. With this task completed the child had taken its place amongst the ancestors. Such an action may have had significant consequences if seen, but love and grief drove them to defy the law of the powerful Catholic Church. Such an act would have provided some small comfort to a family who had lost their child before it could ever have known life.

In conclusion, an obvious but often overlooked statement can be made, that the dead do not bury themselves. The case of Sk953 has demonstrated that even in a time of overwhelmingly uniform burial, individual agency can still be discerned. By reconstructing the events which took place around this unique case, we have caught a glimpse of personal loss, grief, love, and how it drove someone to act in a way contrary to the standard order.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest in publishing this paper.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors provided intellectual input into the content of this paper. Rea Carlin excavated the burial and performed the osteological analysis. Matt Thomas provided the images and generated a 3D photogrammetric model of Sk953 which can be viewed at https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fsketchfab.com%2F3d-models%2Fsk953-159f26f467a84689aaf4982280da68d3%3Ffbclid%3DIwAR1B9jZz1gHyTSmAQI4SitZLnpw21horlpAcqa5KG8zxcjzIL7Lx6l0A&h=AT0mxkxSTms9Ud72SlwK5xXk6t0fSMD8659ah9_W_aDiuLz7jiRLmwylnyGoRR-8UxmHDlxSJC5vAgHZn4nmIMAqb-AE76dnvjeafii_YvuAli5Tbhq3HEZuN7oxjFkHA website.

David Jordan provided the maps and plans. Janet Axworthy identified, processed and stored the finds after micro-excavation. Kevin Cootes interpreted the results of the excavation within the context of later medieval burial rites and was primarily responsible for writing the paper.

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