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'The Mother of the Parish': Finnish Pastors' Wives in Late Seventeenth-Century Funeral Biographies



Miia Kuha (Jyväskylä / My-Parish Visiting Researcher)

In the Nordic countries, the Lutheran Reformation was implemented from above. Finland, part of the Swedish realm until 1809, saw the new confession imposed in the 1520s by king Gustav Vasa, who also sought control of the Church and its resources. Lutheranism was permanently established at the Uppsala Synod in 1593, after which it became the only permitted religious denomination in the country. Like in other parts of Europe, the implementation of the Reformation was inextricably linked to state formation and the centralization of power, resulting in state and Church being ever more closely linked.[1]

Sweden was a profoundly agrarian state, with the majority of the country's population consisting of peasant families. In their small rural communities, the local clergy and their families had a central position. On behalf of the Church, pastors taught their parishioners basics of Christianity, but simultaneously sought to educate obedient and orderly subjects who would pay their taxes and serve in the military during the frequent wars of the era. Clergymen thus governed their parishes in both ecclesiastical and many secular respects, and the parsonage, located near the parish church, was usually one of the largest farms in the area. Pastors had a rather stable economic position, a good social standing, and representation at the Diet, which met in Stockholm, as one of the four political estates of the kingdom.

After the Reformation, clerical marriage was established in Protestant Europe. From early on, pastors' households gained an ideal position as models of Christian family life and moral examples for their communities. Exemplary behavior was expected not only from the clergyman, but also his spouse and children.[2] One of the ways through which this could be conveyed was through funeral sermons and especially the biographies of the deceased that were included at the end.[3] Studying funeral biographies helps to gain a picture of the roles of pastors' and curates' wives who are often marginalized in historical studies. In the earliest twenty extant funeral biographies of clergymen's wives that survive from Finland in the period 1665–1706 (out of around 150 altogether during the same period), the deceased appear as both good Christians, deeply committed to a life of devotion, and as practical organizers of everyday work at the parsonage.[4] The sources even offer glimpses of their interaction with family members. Unfortunately, in the absence of other sources like letters or court records we cannot usually corroborate the picture conveyed by the biography. The author was not supposed to include any negative statements of the deceased and conventions of the genre were carefully followed, which means that the descriptions may not be accurate in every respect.

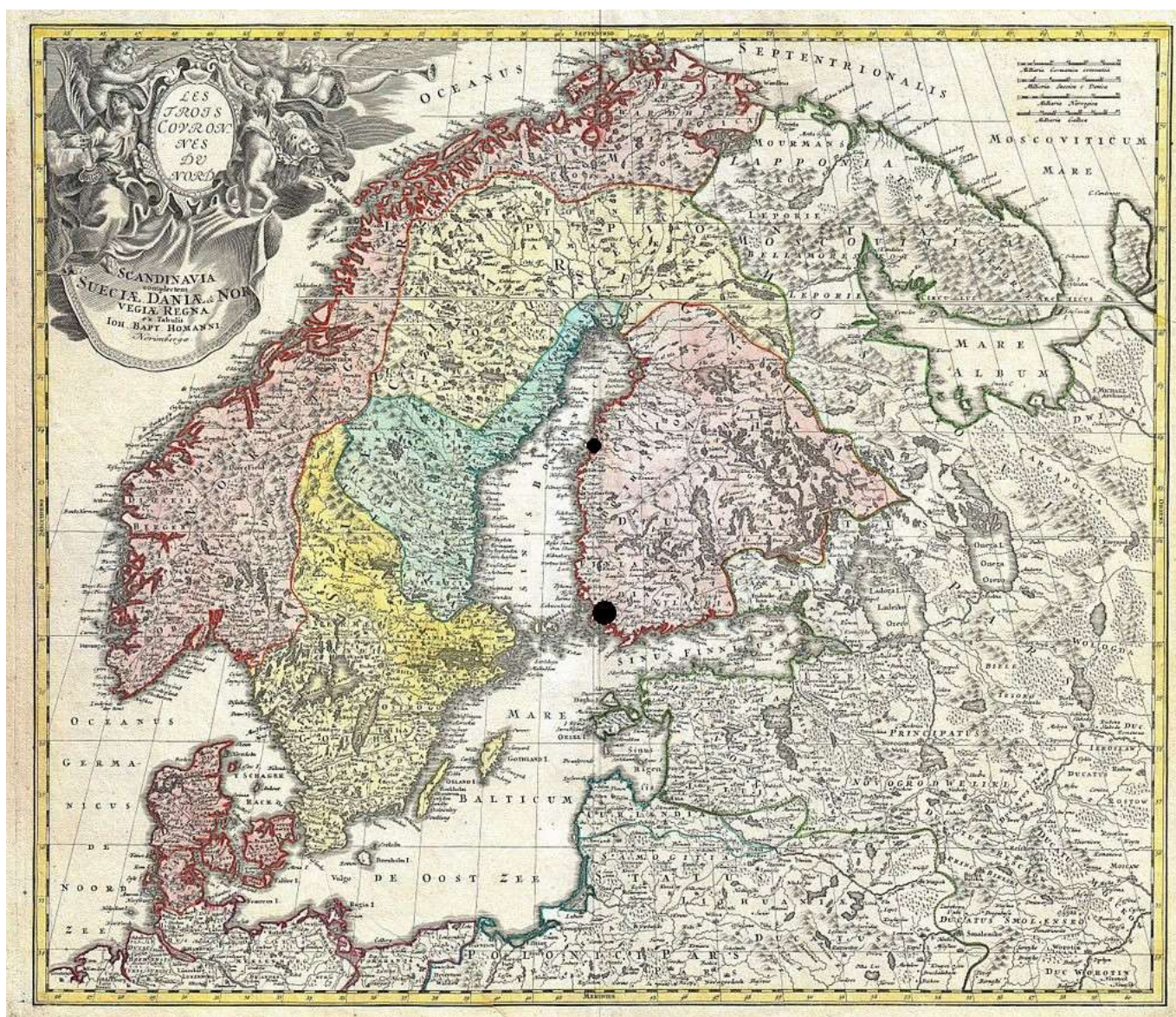


Figure 1

The 1730 Homann Map of Scandinavia. The Finnish towns of Turku/Åbo (bigger dot) and Jakobstad & Pedersöre (smaller dot) have been added to the map by the author.

The biography of Margareta Knutsdotter, written by the pastor of the small west coast town of Jakobstad (marked by the smaller dot on Fig. 1), Laurentius Preutz, and printed in Stockholm in 1668, offers rich detail on the everyday life and work of the pastor's wife (Fig. 2). First, Preutz recounts that Margareta was born in the parsonage of Pedersöre near Jakobstad, in September 1602. Next, as soon as she could talk, Margareta was taught to recite the main doctrines of the Catechism. After that, she learned to read and write, followed by the acquisition of other useful skills for a virtuous young woman. Margareta's parents were apparently pleased with their daughter's obedience and good behaviour. She married her first husband at the age of 16, which was not unusual for a pastor's daughter. The groom was Magnus Gammal, himself a pastor's son and curate from a nearby parish, who later succeeded Margareta's father at Pedersöre. Over the years, the couple had eleven children, but lost as many as nine in their infancy or childhood. Magnus died when Margareta was 33 and, three years later, the widow married Jacob Brennerus, pastor of an adjacent rural parish. With her second husband, Margareta had two more children, one of whom lived to reach adulthood.[5]

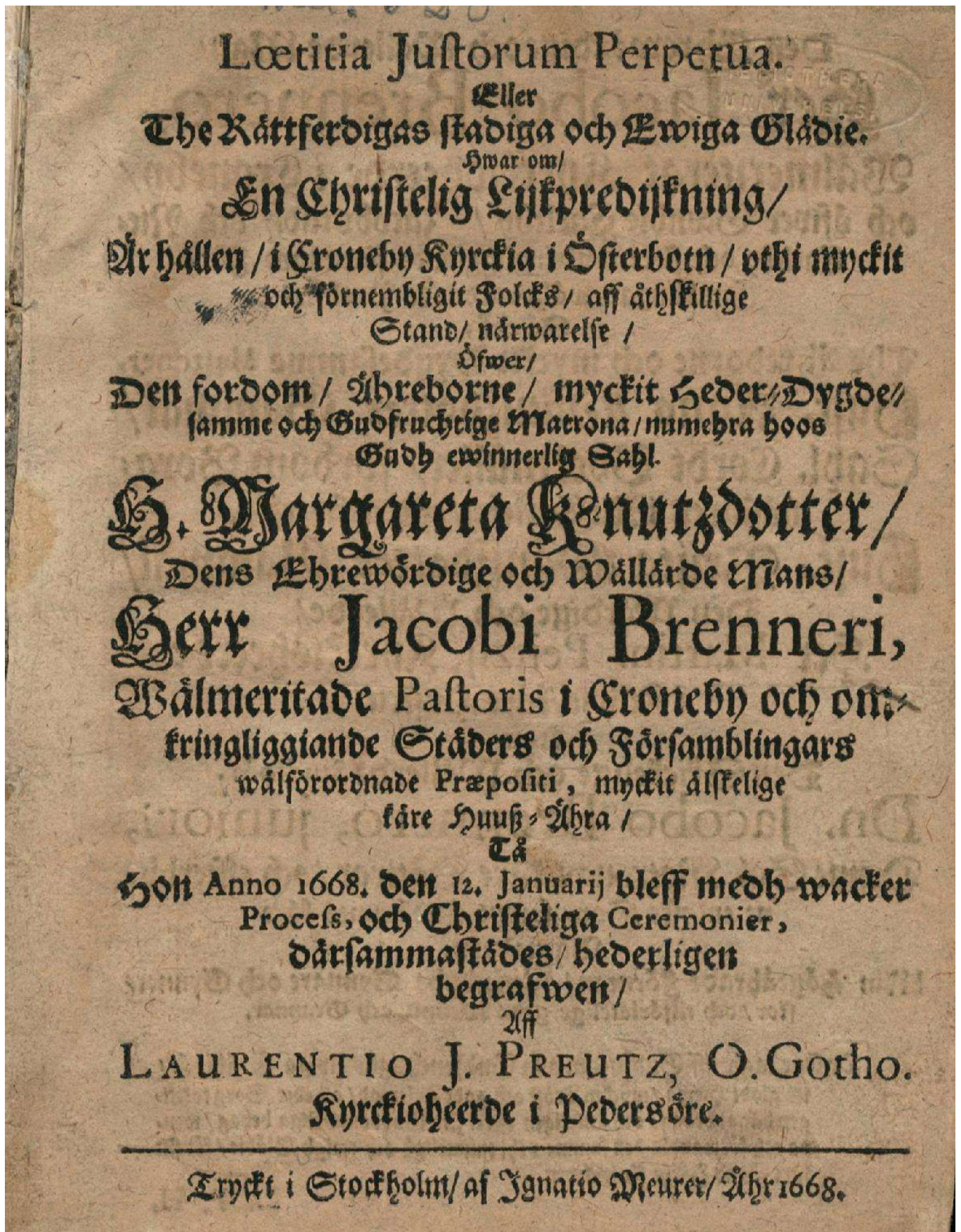


Figure 2

The cover page of Margareta Knutsdotter's funeral sermon, written by pastor Laurentius Preutz and printed in 1668.

The digitized collections of the National Library of Finland,
 <<https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/teos/binding/2127584?page=3>>, accessed 28 May 2024.

According to the biography, Margareta had a 'strong and healthy body, quick wits and good memory'.^[6] The author highlights her skills as the mistress of the parsonage, i.e. the manual as well as managerial qualities needed in everyday life (Fig. 3). Margareta carefully supervised the household servants, provided them with what they needed and paid their salaries. As an ideal housewife, she kept the house clean and in good condition, while catering for guests even when her husband was not present. Pastor Preutz calls Margareta the 'pious mother of the parish', who also fulfilled her charitable role by helping the poor with food and clothing.



Figure 3

One of the few premodern illustrations of the setting pastors' wives like Margareta might have lived in is Petäjävesi church (centre) and old parsonage (left) in Central Finland, painted by A.F. or C.E. Soldan (1840). The Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection.

In his idealized description, Preutz goes on to describe the emotional support Margareta offered her family members, which illuminates the gendered norms of family life. When the pastor was especially burdened by official duties, she would take on everything that could lighten his load. She would not trouble her husband with her own worries but comfort him, bring him joy at moments of melancholy, and tend to him on the sickbed. Last but not least, she raised her children with great care and much motherly affection. Having lost so many sons and daughters, she adopted orphans and poor children to be raised in the parsonage, where she taught them valuable skills.

The author emphasizes the love that Margareta and her second husband felt for each other, so that their married life resembled a 'life of angels', making the twenty-nine years they spent together feel like just a few days.^[7] In funeral biographies of clergymen's wives, the happiness and love that had prevailed in the couple's relationship was always mentioned. The deathbed scene at the end of this source even includes intimate moments where husband and wife expressed their affection towards each other. Feeling that her life was about to end, Margareta is described as having grasped her husband's hand and embraced him with the words: 'Jacob,

master of my heart, hurry to follow me soon'.^[8] Given their advanced years (Margareta dying aged 65), it was a realistic prospect. In other biographies, involving a young wife, we encounter motherly advice for the husband, placing special emphasis on the children's Christian education.^[9]

Stable marriages and good household relations constituted key building blocks of the early modern social order. In the uniformly Lutheran lands of Sweden and Finland, clerical marriage remained largely uncontested, with its merits disseminated not least by funeral biographies. Through idealized descriptions of married life, the genre offered parish congregations (as preached during services) and wider reading audience (when printed) tangible examples of model family life and divisions of labour, while highlighting the spouses' harmonious relations and mutual appreciation. As memory devices, they were effective in promoting and reinforcing official norms and values, which diverged substantially from modern notions of equality between the sexes. With regard to gender roles, the (male) authors focused on the multiple tasks expected from – and performed by – pastors' wives, which offers historians glimpses into women's agency in early modern society.

Biographical note



Miia Kuha is a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests include the histories of religion, family, gender and local communities in the early modern context. Publications include the anthology *Swedish and Finnish Historiographies of the Swedish Realm, c. 1520–1809: Shared Past, Different Interpretations?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), co-edited with Petri Karonen. In spring 2024, she was a My-Parish Fellow and co-hosted the Twenty-Second Warwick Symposium on Parish Research dedicated to the theme of 'Parish Memory'.

Endnotes

[1] On the Reformation in Finland see Jason Lavery, *Reforming Finland: The Diocese of Turku in the Age of Gustav Vasa 1523–1560* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

[2] On clergy wives in different contexts see Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, *From Priest's Whore to Pastor's Wife. Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Helen Parish, *Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000); Anne Thompson, *Parish Clergy Wives in Elizabethan England* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Susan C. Karant-Nunn, 'The Emergence of the Pastoral Family in the German Reformation. The Parsonage as a Site of Socio-Religious Change', in: C. Scott Dixon & Luise Schorn-Schütte (eds), *The Protestant Clergy in Early Modern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[3] See especially Cornelia Niekus Moore, *The Lutheran Funeral Biography in Early Modern Germany* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2006); see also the Wolfenbüttel *Leichenpredigten* database <http://dbs.hab.de/leichenpredigten/> (all urls last accessed on 20 May 2024). For Sweden and Finland cf. Barbro Bergner, 'Dygden som levnadskonst. Kvinnliga dygdeideal under stormaktstiden [Virtue as an art of living: Female ideals of virtue in Sweden's Great Power period]', in Eva Österberg (ed.), *Jämmerdal och fröjdesal. Kvinnor i stormaktstidens Sverige* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1997), 71–124; Otfried Czaika, 'The experience of female readers in Sweden around 1600 - evidence collected from funeral sermons', in: *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* Vol 107 (2016), 242–265; Göran Stenberg, *Döden dikterar. En studie av likpredikningar och gravtal från 1600- och 1700-talen* [Death Dictates: A Study of Funeral Sermons and Funeral Addresses of the 17th and 18th Centuries] (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1998); Olavi Rimpiläinen, *Suomalainen hautauspuhe puhdasoppisuuden aikana* [The Finnish funeral address in the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy] (Helsinki: Suomalainen teologinen kirjallisuusseura, 1973).

[4] Digital versions of the sermons kept at the National Library of Finland are available at: <http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi>. Most were written in Swedish, but those in Finnish have also been transcribed by the digital service of the Institute for the Languages of Finland and published as *Vanhan kirjasuomen korpus*: https://kaino.kotus.fi/korpus/vks/meta/vks_coll_rdf.xml.

[5] Laurentius Preutz, *Loetitia [sic] justorum perpetua: Eller the rättferdigas stadiga och ewiga glädie... en christelig lijkpredikning ... öfwer ... h. Margareta Knutzdotter* [Everlasting joy of the righteous: Or the steady and everlasting joy of the righteous... A Christian funeral sermon... over... wife Margareta Knutzdotter] (Stockholm: Ignatio Meurer, 1668), consulted via <http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi>.

[6] Ibid., p. 48 [in the digital version; no pagination in original].

[7] Ibid., p. 47.

[8] Ibid., p. 55.

[9] Miia Kuha, 'Papinrouvien arjen hengellisyys ruumissaarnejien elämäkerroissa 1600-luvun jälkipuolen Suomessa [The everyday spirituality of clergymen's wives in funeral biographies in late seventeenth-century Finland]', in: Sini Mikkola & Päivi Räisänen-Schröder (eds), *Eletty reformaatio. Historiallisia tapaustutkimuksia eletystä uskonnosta 1500–1600-lukujen Euroopassa* (Helsinki: Suomen kirkkohistoriallinen seura, 2023), 170–196.

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