

Mummies as Medicinal Tools

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Abstract

The term "mummy" is thought to be derived from the Persian or Arab word "moumiya", meaning pitch or bitumen. It likely referred to the black, hard, and resinous substance probably used by the Egyptians in their embalming procedures during the late period and Ptolemaic Roman period. During medieval times and later, Arab and European physicians thought that mummies had medicinal properties. Egyptian mummies dug out of their tombs were sometimes grinded into powder and shipped across the Mediterranean to be sold as medicine for the cure of different diseases; for example epilepsy, abscesses, rashes, migraine, nausea etc. From the 12th to the 17th centuries, mummy remains could be found in apothecaries' shops, and as late as 1908 they could be ordered from the catalogue of the Merck pharmaceutical company.

It is well known that mummies have been an object of great interest in the Western countries since the archaeologists began finding them in large number, but it is most probably a less known fact that in Europe for centuries Egyptian mummies were believed to have medicinal properties and that they were initially sold as a pharmaceutical in powdered form. Even though it has been reported that there was a secret commerce of mummies intended for preparing spell philtres and love potions since Roman times (Proot, 1954) it is beginning from the Middle Age that the use to eat mummies imported in Europe from Egypt for medicinal purposes became widespread. It seems that the use of mummies as medicinal tools, was introduced in Europe by Arabs during the eight century and that it spread shortly after the crusades (twelfth-thirteenth century). Mummies were dug out of the tomb

and ground into powder, balms and ointments. This illegal commerce between Egypt and Europe reached its maximum during the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, when mummies were a very common drug found in the apothecaries' shop, usually in broken pieces or powder (Dannenfeldt, 1985; Gordon-Grube, 1988) and continued until the 19th century. As late as 1908 mummies could be ordered from the catalogue of the German pharmaceutical company Merck which offers: "genuine Egyptian mummy as long as the supply lasts, 17 marks 50 per kilograms" (Gordon-Grube, 1988) even if, according to the 1905 edition of an important German pharmacology handbook, (the Hagers Handbuch der pharmaceutischen Praxis) mummies that were on sale in that period "were mostly only an imitation consisting of resinous red-brown or brown-black pieces, mixed with some browned bone remnants and little pieces of linen. The mumia is stocked in pieces and powder." (Dannenfeldt, 1985; Pringle, 2002). It seems moreover that the 1972 edition, listed mummy's powder and stated that "The true Egyptian mumia derives in part from asphalt, with which the Egyptians embalmed the dead. The true mumia sometimes contains arsenic (Dannenfeldt, 1985)".

But why and how did this commerce begin? According to several authors the reason must be searched in the origin of the term mummy. It seems that the word mummy has derived from the Arabic or Persian word mumiyah, meaning pitch or bitumen, originally referred to a black, asphalt-like substance that oozed from a Persian mountain, thought to have medicinal properties and sought as a cure for many ailments. This substance was largely utilized by the medieval Arab physician in their treatises. As Dannenfeldt (1985) reports, the ninth century physician Al-Kindi considered bitumen as the treatment for different ailments while the tenth century Baghdad physician Rhazes was the earliest to use the word mumia for bituminous substances. The Arab physician Avicenna (Ibn Sinna, 980-1037) also used the word mumiyah for medicinal bitumen. In his *Canon* Avicenna describes mumiyah as useful for a variety of diseases and, as a drug, he never prescribes it alone, but mixed with some herbs or in some carrier as oil, butter, wine or milk (Dawson, 1927).

It must be considered, on this point, that in the West Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) describes medicinal uses of bitumen already in the Roman times. He describes different kinds of

bitumen, which were: *limus* from a lake in Judea, *terra* from the outskirts of Sidon and *liquidum*, which was white, from Babilonia. He also names a liquid bitumen from Apollonia (in modern Albania). All these varieties, called by the Greek *pissaspaltum*, had a lot request. In particular the Babilonian kind, according to him, was indicated in the treatment of cataract and other affections of the eyes, in leprosy, gout etc. As a potion, bitumen taken with wine cured cough and dysentery (Dawson, 1927). The Greek physician Dioscorides (50-70 A.D.) considered the bitumen of the Dead Sea (*bitumen Judaicum*) the best for drugs. When the demand for this substance exceeded the natural supply, an alternative source was sought which was constituted by ancient Egyptian embalmed corpses. These corpses, particularly those prepared in the later period, had a blackened appearance which was erroneously thought to be bitumen while the embalming material was constituted of resins. It seems in fact that when the Arabs entered Egypt and discovered mummies covered by a dark coat, they erroneously thought that this coat was made by bitumen (*mumiyah*) and began calling these bodies *mumiyah*. The term mummy probably comes from this original denomination.

However the mummies' trade and its use as therapeutics might be also due to a mistake in the translation of the Arabic treatises. This is the case, for example, of Gherardo da Cremona who, translating in the twelfth century the Rhazes's "Liber ad Almansorem" into Latin found references to a kind of bitumen that was thought to have notable curative properties and that the Persian called *mumiyah*. He wrongly supposed that this was the same kind of substance used in wrapping the ancient Egyptian corpses. Thus, the embalmed Egyptian dead became known as "mummies" and soon Egyptian mummies were widely sought as a panacea by Europeans. It was in particular thought that, in little doses, mummies could be a cure for almost every illness. In fact eating mummy was supposed to cure among other things, coughs, epilepsy, migraines, ulcers, cases of poisons, fractures, rashes, palpitations, abscesses, nausea, haemorrhage and, finally, it was considered a general panacea. But its main virtue was supposed to be the prevention of blood coagulation and the treatment of haematomas. Whatever the explanations for the use of mummies as medicinal tools may be, certainly *mumiyah* is one of the biggest misunderstanding in the history of medicine.

So in demand was *mumiyah* as a drug, that the search for it in the Egyptian tombs took on industrial proportion and consequently mummies's trafficking widespread. It must be considered that the increased intensity of the search for the *mumiyah* of the Egyptian tombs was due to the increased demand for such a drug leading to a limitation of the supply of natural bitumen from the Dead Sea and Persia. To satisfy the demand, the Egyptian graves were completely raided. It is not possible to establish how many Egyptian mummies crossed Mediterranean to reach Europe, but it is sure that it was a very long lasting and popular trade which concerned for centuries many European countries.

When the Egyptian Government prohibited this traffic of dead bodies, fake mummies of more recently date were concocted to serve the aims of profit. Fake mummies were the bodies of recently executed criminals or of slaves, treated with bitumen and exposed to the sun, to produce mummified tissue which was then sold as an authentic *mumiyah*.

As previously pointed out, the use of mummies as medicinal tools reached its maximum during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who analyzed the mummy's powder, affirmed that "mummies have a great power in staunching and this can be due to the balms mixtures, which are glutinous". Paracelsus (1493-1541) devised a "balsam and a treacle of mummy" and the King Francis I of France, the Maecenas of Leonardo, is thought to have on always a pouch containing powdered mummy and rhubarb, in case of an emergency (Pringle, 2002). It must be noted on this point that in this period the price of the mummies powder was very high and thus only the kings and the wealthy Europeans could afford to buy this remedy.

In the course of time the curative properties of bitumen were forgotten and its virtues were finally transferred to the bodies themselves which were perhaps considered a powerful remedy because it was thought that they maintained something of the *vis vitalis* of the individual. This might mean that magic still played a considerable part even in the rational medicine. The practice of eating mummies for medicinal purposes can moreover be considered as a form of cannibalism or more precisely of a socially approved medicinal cannibalism. It must be considered on this point that therapy based on substances of animal and most specifically of human origins probably goes back to the Greek medicine (Cavalli, 2001). Thus the use of eating mummies mainly from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries can be viewed in the context of the various forms of cannibalism frequently found in the history of mankind.

Beginning from the Middle Age the mummy was included in herbals as shown in the "Livre des simples medicines", the most popular medieval pharmacopoeia, among the flowers and the fruits, the minerals and the herbs used by apothecaries. Thus the image of the death paradoxically became a precious and refined image of hope in the life (Camille, 1999).

In particular the representation of the mummies in the herbals can be interpreted in the light of the Middle Age idea that every human being was believed to incorporated elements belonging to the plants and animal worlds. The herbalist John Parkinson (1567-1650) devoted a long chapter of his herbal to the mummy's virtues. He describes mummy as being "of much and excellent use in all countries of Europe". It is "the very body of a man or woman brought chiefly from Egypt or Syria (no other part of the world so good)".

After the sixteenth century it seems that a gradual rejection of mummies as medicinal tools took place. This was due also to the fact that many argued against the use of taking mummies as drug, as a noxious superstition. For

example the French military surgeon Ambroise Paré, who was the very first to sterilize the war wounds, affirmed: "This wicked kinde of drugge, doth nothing help the diseased...it also inferres many troublesome symptoms, as the paine of the hearth or stomacke vomiting and stinke of the mouth (Barbero, anno).According to some authors (Wotton, 1972; Gordon-Grube, 1988), the mummies consumed at the time of Paré came from France, and were prepared from "bodies stolen at night from the gibbets, the brains and entrails removed, and the bodies dried in a furnace, and then dipped in pitch".

However, in spite of the blames, mummies continued to be in demand and the pharmacists continued to dispense them. In 1697 only, it seems that over 80 quintals were exported.

The medical treatises of the period point out that there were different kinds of mummies with different therapeutic value, depending on their origins, as for example the *Mummy of the Arabians*, which is a Liquament, or concreted Liquor, obtained in Sepulchres, by exudation from Carcasses embalmed with Aloes, Myrrh and Balsam, the *Egyptian Mummies* which were bodies embalmed with pissasphaltus, the sun-dried bodies found in the desert and the natural pissasphaltus.

Mummies were perhaps also known and used as medicinal tools in U.S.A. As reported from the January 1978 edition of the *Maine Life*: "In the seventeenth century mummy's powder made from groundup brittle mummy remains reportedly was as popular in apothecary shops as is aspirin today. When the interest faded, mummies were ground and sold as meal fertilizers". However, according to Gordon-Grube (1988) "the American medical community apparently never officially sanctioned such remedies. I do not find them mentioned in lists of medical supplies in the Colonies, nor in early American pharmacopeias".

In conclusions, as sir Thomas Brown (1658) wrote in his

treatise "The Hydriothaphia or Urn-burial", which gave precise instructions on the use of mummy as a universal remedy: "Egyptian ingenuity was more unsatisfied, contriving their bodies in sweet consistences, to attend the return of their souls. But all is vanity, feeding the wind, and folly. Egyptian mummies, which Cambyses or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummy is become merchandise, Mizraim cures wound, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams".

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