

## Medieval body embalming in the Blessed Ranieri da Borgo (†1304)

*Martina Mandarano<sup>1</sup>, Andrea Czortek<sup>2</sup>, Luca Ventura<sup>3,4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Section of Anatomic Pathology and Histology, Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Perugia, Italy; <sup>2</sup>Historical Archive, Bishopry of Sansepolcro, Italy; <sup>3</sup>Division of Pathology, San Salvatore Hospital, L'Aquila, Italy; <sup>4</sup>Department of Biotechnological and Applied Clinical Sciences, University of L'Aquila, Italy

**Abstract.** Ranieri da Borgo was a lay brother of the Conventual Franciscans, dead on November 1st, 1304. The local Municipality played a significant role in obtaining the balm for body preservation, in recording miracles since the very day of his death, and allowing the construction of the main altar above the crypt hosting his body. In order to plan a new recognition, we performed a preliminary survey. Probably in his original clothes, the mummified body was lying inside a wooden casket dating to XVI Century. The right arm was lacking, due to past burglary, whereas the left hand and feet were in excellent state of preservation. The face was covered with homogeneous brownish matter, suggesting embalming. Intentionally preserved bodies of charismatic religious people are considered the most ancient examples of body embalming in Europe. A review of the literature allowed us to find only ten artificially embalmed Holy Bodies from 1297 to 1482. In this context, Ranieri could represent the eleventh and oldest male example. Further analyses are needed to confirm this historical assumption.

**Key words:** mummies, embalming techniques, Saints, Blesseds, Central Italy

In the late Middle Ages, the lack of the natural corpse decay was considered a prodigious sign. Until 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the incorruptibility of the body used to be an essential requirement during Canonization trials, and even today it represents an attribute of sanctity in people's common feeling. In some cases, the body was artificially mummified (funerary embalming) to be preserved for veneration and/or longtime exhibition after death (1). However, historical sources and hagiographies rarely mention the human intervention in body conservation. Nowadays, at least 10 cases of artificially embalmed Holy Bodies have been known, dating back from 1297 to 1482 (1-3) (Table 1). These examples are extremely relevant and show us how, despite the official papal prohibition against dismembering and boiling corpses, the treatment of bodies was a fairly common practice (2).

Ranieri da Borgo San Sepolcro (today Sansepolcro, Toscana, Italy) - also known as Ranieri Rasina or "de Rasinis" (probably from the village Ràssina) -

was a lay brother of the Conventual Franciscans. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1304 Ranieri died and immediately his body was embalmed; afterwards, it was entombed in San Francesco's church in Sansepolcro, where it is still preserved. He left a deep mark in the collective memory of the local community, and, after his death, his cult was promptly documented. The Municipality of Sansepolcro played a significant role in such a promotion; it not only allowed the construction of the main altar in that church, placing it just above the crypt in which the body has been kept, but also recording Ranieri's miracles since the very day of his death, and obtaining the balm for the preservation of the body (4, 5). This latter instance was repeatedly cited in hagiographies, according to which two patricians from Borgo San Sepolcro were sent to Rome in order to request the balsam to a cardinal (5, 6). They obtained it easily and for free, because of Ranieri had warned in a dream both the messengers where to find it and the cardinal to give it them. Stefano di Giovanni

**Table 1.** Artificial mummies of Saints and Blesseds.

Name	Gender	Order	Death	Region
S. Margherita da Cortona	F	Franciscan	1297	Toscana
B. Marina da Spoleto	F	Augustinian	1301	Umbria
S. Chiara da Montefalco	F	Augustinian	1308	Umbria
B. Margherita da Città di Castello	F	Dominican	1320	Umbria
S. Caterina da Siena	F	Dominican	1380	Lazio
S. Bernardino da Siena	M	Franciscan	1444	Abruzzo
S. Rita da Cascia	F	Augustinian	1457	Umbria
B. Cristina da Spoleto	F	Augustinian	1458	Umbria
S. Giacomo della Marca	M	Franciscan	1476	Campania
B. Pacifico Ramati	M	Franciscan	1482	Sardegna

(named Sassetta) depicted this episode between 1437 and 1444 in the *predella* of the polyptych for the High Altar of San Francesco's church, one of the largest and most splendid altarpieces of the early Italian Renaissance (7).

In 2004, during the centenary celebrations of Ranieri's death, no intervention on the body was performed. The last Canonical Recognition dates to 1954 and was performed during the celebration for the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary from his death, under the bishopric of Domenico Bornigia at the Diocese of Sansepolcro (5). Unfortunately, no information or document related to this intervention could be found in the bishopric archive. According to historical sources, previous inspections of the body were carried out in 1740 and in 1761 (4). On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1802 Pope Pius VII beatified Ranieri *ab immemorabili*, and his liturgical memory occurs on October 31<sup>st</sup>.

Recently, we had the opportunity to perform a preliminary survey of Ranieri's body, in order to plan a forthcoming recognition. The body, probably in his original clothes, was lying inside a wooden casket dating to XVI Century. Metal plates fixed a glass framed in wood to the case, ensuring body protection (Fig. 1). Bishop Bornigia's seals were still recognizable on it. Signs of burglary were noted and ascribed to the desecration and consequent theft of Ranieri's right arm, which was discovered in 2006. The observation through the glass allowed to confirm the lack of the right hand, whereas the left hand was extremely well-preserved. Feet were also in an excellent state of

preservation. The face was almost entirely covered with homogeneous brownish matter. The latter suggested embalming material, but restoration work could not be excluded. Small defects in this material allowed to visualize portions of eyebrows, mustache, and beard. Such findings corroborated the historical account of body embalming.

Italian mummies of Saints and Blessed represent the most ancient examples of body embalming in Europe. Most of them were produced in interesting sociopolitical contexts. In fact, this phenomenon was purely urban, concerned a peculiar social and religious environment, and had a prevalent female extent (2). The bodies of charismatic religious people, who already was considered saints in life, were preserved to become a tangible proof of the divine protection of the community. They could be used as a source of revenue, as well as to gain political or religious autonomy. It is not a case that the practice arose in a well-defined area of central Italy (Toscana, Umbria, Abruzzo, and Lazio), where civic independence was strongly perceived. The Municipal authority engagement is documented in the funerary embalming of Margherita from Cortona (1297), Margherita from Città di Castello (1320), and Cristina from Spoleto (1458) (2). Ranieri da Borgo may be fully included in this historical background. He could represent the eleventh example of an embalmed Holy Body, the ninth in Central Italy, and the oldest one belonging to a male subject. However, further analyses are certainly needed to confirm this remarkable historical assumption, which also may pave



**Figure 1.** A) The Blessed Ranieri in a holy card dating back to 1954. B) Current appearance of the face covered by brownish material, with hair visible through small defects. C) Right hand lacking. D) Well-preserved left hand with nails.

the way to deepen the socio-political knowledge of Central Italy during the Middle Ages.

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## Correspondence:

Luca Ventura  
 Division of Pathology,  
 San Salvatore Hospital,  
 Coppito, L'Aquila, Italy  
 E-mail: lucaventura67@gmail.com