

Unlocking the secrets of Modern mummies: an untapped resource in Northern Italian Museums

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Abstract. This letter expresses concerns regarding the current state of research on the mummies housed in museums in Northern Italy, particularly those from the modern era. Despite the unique and largely untapped resource these mummies represent, they have received relatively little attention from researchers compared to osteological human remains. Restudying these mummies could provide new insights into prevalent health conditions during the modern era and shed light on the impact of changing cultural practices and medical technologies on individual health. Additionally, studying these mummies could provide valuable insights into the cultural practices surrounding death and burial during this time. However, there are several obstacles that make this difficult, including lack of funding and resources, and ethical concerns surrounding the study of human remains. The author urges the scientific community to recognize the value of these resources and to work together to develop a plan for their restudy and preservation.

Key words: Mummies, paleopathology, Modern Era, Italy

Dear Editor,

I am writing to you to express my concerns regarding the current state of research on the mummies, especially those of the modern era, housed in museums in Northern Italy. As a researcher in the field of paleopathology, I believe that restudying these mummies could greatly contribute to our understanding of the health and disease patterns of the past, as well as shed light on the cultural practices surrounding death and burial (1). Indeed, the mummies housed in Northern Italian museums are a unique and largely untapped resource for paleopathologists. They represent a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, from wealthy nobles to commoners, and span a range of time periods from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Despite their potential value, these mummies have received relatively little attention from researchers in recent years compared to osteological human remains (2, 3). This may be due both to the fact that the remains from archaeological excavations are quantitatively more numerous, easier to access, and can be analyzed in less expensive

ways and because Italian literature has focused on the mummies of southern Italy.

Analysing or restudying these mummies could provide new insights into a variety of health conditions that were prevalent during the modern era, including tuberculosis, syphilis, and other infectious diseases (4). It could also shed light on the impact of changing cultural practices and medical technologies on the health of individuals during this time. For example, the increasing use of embalming techniques during the 19th century may have had a significant impact on the preservation of the bodies and the types of pathologies that are observable today (5). In this sense, the collections of embalmed and petrified bodies constitute an important heritage, on par with the collections of wet anatomical preparations, which are housed in the main Italian anatomical collections.

In addition to their scientific value, the study of these mummies could also provide important insights into the cultural practices surrounding death and burial during the Modern era. For example, the use of mum-

mification techniques among certain religious groups, such as the Capuchin friars, could provide valuable insights into their beliefs and practices surrounding death and the afterlife (6). As mentioned, the practice of conservation of the body is mainly linked to southern Italy, however, also in Northern Italy there are contexts in which this was used. Not only that, this practice of treating the body becomes, in some cases, emblematic of the historical and archaeological context, coming to delineate a wide-ranging cultural phenomenon.

Despite the potential value of restudying these mummies, there are currently several obstacles that make this difficult. One major obstacle is the lack of funding and resources available to support this type of research. Another is the need to balance the scientific value of these mummies with the ethical concerns surrounding the study of human remains.

Despite these challenges, I believe that the potential benefits of restudying the mummies housed in Northern Italian museums are too significant to ignore. I urge the scientific community to recognize the value of these resources and to work together to develop a plan for their restudy and preservation.

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