

# The heart burial and the history of an emblematic organ

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**Summary.** The heart still has an important symbolic value as it had in the past. The old prejudices about the role of the brain and the primacy of the heart does not seem totally overdone. Primitive men already knew that in their body there was something *magical* that beat following a different rhythm depending on their emotional state. Anthropology, philosophy, religion, history and history of medicine have studied this interesting issue. There are several examples demonstrating the symbolic value of the heart. In particular, here we will examine the history linked to the heart of Kosciuszko, as well as the heart of Chopin and the body of Lenin.

**Key words:** heart burial, Aristotle, Kosciuszko, Chopin, Lenin

## Introduction

Who am I? What am I? Am I a body? Or do I have a body? How many bodies do we have? If we think about, we can see that, for example, we have a biological body, but, at the same time, we are also a cultural body. Then, as we know, we see and we feel differently not only our body, but also others bodies. Medicine, as well as anthropology, philosophy and literature, has focused on this vast and curious subject, that continues to be a key topic of our customs and behaviors.

The body has been studied and viewed from different perspectives. Several volumes would be necessary to remember whatever has been written and said about this debated subject. Therefore, we had to make a choice. In our paper, some issues will be examined with attention, others will be only cited, other ones will be overlooked. The purpose is to try to offer

an interdisciplinary point of view, recalling a chapter of the history of medicine that, still now, has not been completely studied: the heart-burial. In particular, we will examine the symbolic-communicative value of this particular organ. First of all, we have to look at a central question: why, almost all over the world, the heart represents, in the collective imagination, the “location of passions, feelings, and in general of affections and emotions” (1)? Why did we choose the heart and not another organ? In the sixth century, one of the most important medieval encyclopedist, Saint Isidore of Seville, already narrated the central role assigned to the heart. He thought that we had to put the seat of knowledge inside this organ. Then, according to the etymology, he supposed that the origin of the term *heart* came from the Greek word to say *care*. The importance of this link between heart and medicine is evident, in fact medicine is the science that is able not only to heal, but also to take care of the sick.

### Aristotle's idea about heart

As we know, the heart has been the main character of many practices. In the old days, a common custom was to kill enemies and to eat their hearts. This holy magic habit was aimed to take over their strength. However, there were many other widespread mores, such as to offer the victims hearts to gods or to eat the dead heart to take over his noblest part and, in this way, to drive out his eventual thirst of revenge. Over time, the heart role has changed little by little. Notable is what happened in the Chivalric Romance. In this period the heart started to take on a negative connotation. Heart was no more eaten, and, always more frequently, it was *got to eat*. so that it stopped to be tied to magic rituals and became something linked to revenge concept. Giovanni Boccaccio, in the *Decameron* (IV, 9), tells us the most famous story of a woman forced to eat her lover heart by her husband, who killed him. Tales like this one have crossed the geographical and temporal boundaries. Often, novellas were about not just a woman, but twelve women which were forced to eat the heart of their common lover. In this case the reference to the Christian tradition of the twelve apostles and to the rite of the Eucharist is obvious. Then, it is also important to note that each tale around this episode was characterized by some slight variations, introduced by authors according to their sensitivity, as well as to traditions, idiosyncrasies and social conventions typical of the historical context.

This can be considered one of the most significant ritual linked to the heart. However, if we speak about heart, we have to remember one of the main philosophical topics: the soul-body dualism. In particular, prephilosophical wisdom and philosophical translation were able to express some important heart-related concepts. For example, we can think about Parmenides, Agostino, Plato, Pascal and Kierkegaard. In this paper, we chose to pay particular attention to Aristotle's ideas (384-322 BC). As we know, Aristotle applied himself to the metaphysical - the science of being - and to its multiple manifestations, the categories. From an ontological point of view, these are the ways in which reality appears; whereas, from a logical point of view, these correspond to the first large

predicates within which all other possible predicates are. Among all categories, the Substance is the most important for the reason that we always speak about it and all other categories presuppose it. When Aristotle uses the term Substance, he means an individual and autonomous being, the τὸδε τι (*tòde ti*), *this one*. Therefore, since the question "What is this?" can be made about everything, he thought that everything could be defined Substance (2). In fact, Aristotle explains us that "some things are called beings because they are substances, others because they are attributes of substances, others because they are a road to substance, or because they are perishings or privations or qualities of substance, or productive or generative of substance" (3).

We have already said that all other categories can be related to Substance. However, we have to remember that substances are the ontologically basic things, while all the other categories, such as qualities, exist since they are related to the substances. So that qualities are beings, but in a different way than substances. Indeed, the philosopher wrote that "a substance - that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all - is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man" (4). To make easier the Aristotelian idea, we can say that, according to his own definition, Substance can not be considered a form-matter mix, but it is rather composed of matter and form. Matter is what makes up the thing and it can be determined only from an empirical point of view. Form, instead, is the set of specific qualities of the thing, the structure that makes it what it is. Form is the active element that structured matter. "The substance is composed of both - I mean composed of the matter and the form" (5). In other words, Substance is a self-subsistent, an independent, thing and it is made of matter and form which are inseparably united in the *synolon*. Unlike non-substances, qualities and all other categories, that are not separable and that only exist in substances, we have to keep in mind that Substance is "a this one" (5). According to this idea, Aristotle writes that "it is also clear that the soul is the primary substance, the body is matter, and man or animal is composed of the two as universal. As for Socrates or Coriscus, if 'Socrates' soul is also Socrates, he is spoken of in two ways; for

some speak of him as soul, some as the compound” (6). Therefore, we can say that Aristotle believed that man is matter since he has a material body, but at the same time, he is form since he is a rational animal with an essence, the soul, which makes him what it is.

Highlighting most relevant Aristotelian ideas about soul-body dualism, we must pay attention to the fact that the soul (form) can never be separated from the body (matter) and that the soul, as a pilot of a ship, is “the first cause by which we live, think and perceive” (7). Aristotle also tried to unify all the soul functions into the heart, where there is the “origin of life”. In this way, Aristotle gave a new solid foundation to cardio-centrism even if there had been some thinkers who had already declared that the centre of psychic life was to be placed in the brain (brain-centrism).

Probably, this Aristotelian idea took origin by the ancient Egyptian practice of psychostasis, the weighing of the heart. As well as Egyptians, also primitive men attributed to the heart fully vital function. Cave paintings are an interesting proof of this belief. In particular, in Spain, there are some representations not only of mammoths, but also of their hearts drawn in the precise point where organs were within animal bodies. Thus, ancient people already knew that inside their bodies, as well as inside animals that they hunted, the heartbeat followed emotional states.

Aristotle believed in the cardio-centrism idea, even if, before him, there were some authors who spoke about brain-centrism, such as Alcmaeon of Croton (sixth century BC), Plato (428-347 BC) and also Hippocrates (460-370 BC) who wrote that we can distinguish ugly and beauty, as well as bad and good thanks to our brain (8). After Aristotle, we will have to wait Galen (130-201 BC) to see partially refuted this these. However, even if Galen rejected Aristotelian cardio-centrism, he also gave new force to the traditional idea that the innate body warm originates in the heart which is the only organ directly linked to the soul. Then, we have also to note that, in the following centuries, medical and religious authorities legitimized Galen’s works, since they considered these ideas inspired directly by God. At that time, it was impossible to make critics to Galen and this is the reason why his thought still be predominant until the middle of the seventeenth century.

Another problem that we have to keep in mind is that anatomy, as well as heart physiology, remained vague since human dissection were forbidden for a long time. Therefore, physicians and surgeons thought that almost everything that they observed in animals bodies happened likewise in human bodies. For example, we can think about Marcus Aurelius court physician: many times, he dissected pigs, dogs and monkeys and exceptionally some gladiators. Then, more or less all the physicians continued to believe that heart was the emotions seat since they continued to observe that anger, sorrow and joy had immediate repercussions on the heartbeat and that this movement was involuntary. We find a first little change during the Middle Age and the Renaissance, when physicians returned to analyse anatomical findings. Nevertheless, only Vesalius (1514-1564) irrevocably refuted Aristotelian and Galen conceptions: he definitely placed heart at the centre of the vascular circulation. He arrived to formulate these original conclusions - that are reported in his famous work, *De humani corporis fabrica* - studying only human bodies. We know that, in the last three centuries, medicine has never stopped to demonstrate cardiovascular physiology, but the symbolic value of the heart is still there today. Why? Why do we continue to think that heart function is not only to pump blood? We can find interesting examples in our common way to communicate sentiments and emotions: each of us, at least once in life, has used expressions such as “to be heartless”, “have a stone heart” or “a broken heart”. This is a simple proof of the priority that heart still has over the brain. Then, noteworthy is also the Christian custom to worship Jesus heart. According to Aristotle, more than three hundred years after his birth, Church fixed the privileged role of the heart in spite of all other organs. Furthermore, Jewish Torah, as well as Bible, incentivized the idea that heart was the real representation of human consciousness, location of emotional life, as well as of intelligence and wisdom (9). According to this symbolic relevance, in almost all the holy places, there are saint’s representations with their heart in hands: St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Gertrude the Great or St. Catherine of Siena are, maybe, the more illustrated.

## Hearts without bodies

Many populations share the idea that courage, generosity, love as well as hatred and passion have to be located in the heart. Therefore, all over the world, people who live in places geographically distant and who have different cultural and religious beliefs, put in the heart the centre of their sentimental life. In Europe, as it happened already in Egypt many centuries before, some artists and sovereigns chose to store separately their heart to better protect it from decay and erosion. Over time, seven hundred hearts were extracted from bodies. This is a practice that started in the twelfth century, but the greatest concentration of the phenomenon was between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, with a peak of one hundred and ninety hearts in the seventeenth century (10). For example, still today, in the Rouen Cathedral, there is the heart of William the Conqueror (1027-1087); while the heart of Philip IV the Fair (1268-1314), King of France, is buried in the Basilica of Fontainebleau. Charles V (1338-1380), a French king, has three tombs, one for his body, one for his guts and another one for his heart. According to his testamentary disposition, the heart of Napoleon, closed off in a jar containing ethyl alcohol, was delivered to his wife, Marie Louise. Significant is also the preservation of the popes' hearts, as well as the *Augustinerkirche* in Vienna where there is the "Tomb of hearts". Fifty royals, dead between 1637 and 1878, stocked there their hearts to preserve imperial characters. Then, all the hearts of Bavarian kings, dead from 1632 to 1958, are conserved in silver urns in the Bavarian Patroness chapel of Altötting where St. Rupert - first bishop of Salzburg, the apostle of the Bavarians - baptized the first Bavarian Duke (10).

We have seen how heart can be analysed according to different points of view, from the philosophy until the anthropology and the history. However, all this attention to the heart maybe has to be observed looking back to the question: what happened after death? Almost everywhere, in fact, the heart is also considered the soul house: this can be considered the main reason why people, all over the times, thought that heart needed a particular burial to be conserved as well as possible. Although human costumes and social contexts have changed, questions about heart

- and thus about life after death - still exist. Among several demonstrations of practical solutions found by men (11), first at all, we would like to remember the history of the body, or better of the heart, of the Polish national hero. At the end of his military and political career, Tadeusz Kosciuszko (1746-1817) disappointed by his country, decided to go to live to Switzerland. Here the brother of his friend, Peter Josef Zeltner, gave him a small apartment attached to the Zeltner villa (this place is now the Kosciuszko Museum). In the last years of his life, he spent a lot of time with his friend's daughter, Emilie. He was for her a tutor. When he died, according to his disposition, his viscera were buried at the Zuchwil cemetery, his embalmed body brought in the Jesuit church, while his heart was donated to Emilie Zeltner. Some months after his death, Poles asked to bring home the body of their national hero. So that, the 23th June 1818, Kosciuszko body was buried at the Wawel Castle in Krakow. We have to remember that the Third Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had taken place few years before. The Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and Habsburg of Austria progressively had divided among themselves all the Commonwealth lands. Based on this historical event, somebody said that "as Poland was fragmented into three parts, its great national hero had three graves: Krakow, Warsaw and Zuchwil" (12). The Polish national hero heart, donated to his friend's daughter, followed the girl during all her transfers. Emilie, happy and proud of this gift, kept it in a glass urn and she always brought it with her. She married with Gian Battista Morosini; so she lived in Switzerland, before, and then in Italy, in Varese. Here Morosini bought an elegant villa with a big garden. In the park, Emilie built away a particular heart-burial: a jar with a lid located on a memorial stone, which still exists, where we can read the words "Cor Taddaei Kosciuszko". The heart stayed more than forty years in Varese. When they sold the house in Varese, the heart came back in Switzerland with Emilie (13). Then, when in 1927 Pole decided to create a museum about Kosciuszko in Warsaw, the heart was transferred there. Linked to the history of this heart, mostly remarkable is the fate of Emilie son. Emilio Morosini, in fact, took part in the Roman Republic during the First Italian War of Independence (1849). Surely, the choice to sacrifice his life was the result of the education that he received by

his parents. Although the heart-burial practice was a usual custom in antiquity times (14), a question arises: did the heart - that was in the garden where Emilio grew up - influence his choice? When he was a child, he spent his days in the park in Varese and so we can suppose that sometimes he stopped himself in front of the urn, looking to the heart of the Polish hero. Can this heart have stimulated and nourished Emilio patriotism and bravery (15)?

Moreover, very interesting is also the history of the heart of Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849). He was born in Poland, but he emigrated to Paris with his family after the Partitions of Poland. When he died, according to his will, his heart was removed from his body. His remains were buried in Paris, in Père Lachaise cemetery, while his heart was placed in a jar full of cognac to be preserved and brought in Poland. In fact, Chopin wanted that the symbol of his soul rested in his native land. Therefore, his sister Ludwika, hiding it under her skirt, eluded Russian control and brought the musician heart in Poland. The heart reached Warsaw, stayed few days to their relatives and then it was put in a Holy Cross Church pillar. During the Second World War, and in particular in 1944, Nazis withdrew the musician heart-burial to protect it from bombs. In fact, they considered Chopin a "their" composer, because of the influence that German musicians had on his music. After the war, German people returned the heart to the Polish church in the course of a solemn ceremony. This event became more curious if we think to the historical moment. At that time, people's life seemed to have lost its undisputed value, but the symbolic value of Chopin's heart still was undeniable. Nazis bombed Warsaw: they did not worry about human lives, but they took care that the musician heart was not damaged. At the end of the war, they also paid attention to give back the heart to Poland, according to Chopin's will.

Finally, after the history of a national hero and of a musician, noteworthy is also the history of the body of a contemporary political man: Vladimir Ilich Lenin. On 21st January 1924, the highest Soviet authorities had to face with a very difficult problem: what to do with Lenin's body? They had very different positions and it was not easy to reconcile them. In fact, there were involved not only religious traditions or cultural factors, but also ideological attitudes and issues related

to the looming modernization. Was it possible to destroy his body? Was it better the modern cremation or the religious embalming? We know that, after a long debate, they decided to embalm Lenin's body. So that, even if, in general, Russians thought that body veneration was out of their tradition, revolutionaries were not able to slip out of the power of a material symbol of their nation. The sepulchre, where Lenin's body is preserved, never became, as some feared, a pilgrimage place where to go to ask miracles, but, still today, continues to be an explicit proof of the strong political symbolism that can be tied not only to a person, or to his heart, but also to all his body. In conclusion, we can say that this is a typical example of an allegorical treatment of a body that can be considered a social *thing* and that can have a symbolic authority.

## Conclusion

Back to the issue of medical history, there are some key questions such as why, in eighteenth century, did surgeons work for a cultural custom? Why did they operate a body to explain a heart that would then be *only* stored in a *jar*? Did they do it for the money? Or did they share the choice of their *patient*? These relevant problems are still waiting for full answers. All the authors which examined the heart burial practice, or the body conservation, focused on the choice of those who wanted to preserve their heart separately from their body, but we know little or nothing about physicians who did these surgical operations. The medical practice placed itself at the service of a ritual, but is it right? We need additional investigations to study also these aspects of an issue that, still now, we can say that it has been only partially examined.

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