

Preserving the Pontiff: an Account of the Body Preservation Methods Used by the Roman Catholic Church

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Incorruptibility is an important topic in the major Christian denominations. If a body or its parts do not undergo the normal process of decay, it is sometimes considered a sign of sanctity, attributed to divine intervention. Even though body preservation and incorruptibility are seen as distinct, bodily remains of saints are objects of veneration.

Historically, many of the bodies of deceased Roman popes were artificially preserved, buried in conditions enhancing the probability of natural preservation, or both. These circumstances have created a number of bodily relics of popes, subsequently canonized as saints, even without claims for incorruptibility.

The present report summarizes some of the recorded methods used for preservation of the bodies of the Roman popes.

Key words: body preservation, embalming, pope, relics

Introduction

In the past, the lack of decay of a dead body has often been seen as miraculous. Finding a body which defies the natural course of decomposition was unexplainable and was attributed to a divine intervention. Some individuals were canonized as saints mainly because their body were found in a more or less preserved state, and were called Incorruptible [8].

The importance of relics was explained by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*: “In memory of [the saints], we ought to honor any relics in a fitting manner, principally their bodies, which were temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling and operating in them, and destined to be likened to the body of Christ by the glory of the Resurrection” [1]. The saints are viewed as intermediaries between this world and God, being liminal beings. They dwell both in this life as well in the afterlife, and are present in their physical bodies through the Holy Spirit, as St. John Damascene says, “For death is rather the sleep of the saints than their death” [6].

The bodies of holy individuals are both temples of the Holy Spirit and “saving fountains which in many ways pour out benefactions” [6]. The preserved body becomes a sacramental icon, which preserves its human nature, while in the same time acts as a mediator of the divine [16].

Historically faithful have chosen to preserve the bodies of prominent individuals considered holy during their lifetime [10]. In this fashion laymen could remain in touch with the saint and ask for prayer intercession before God. The Pope is the most important figure in the Catholic church, being infallible and holding the seat of the Prince of Apostles St. Peter. Despite the controversies a Pope might be associated with, he is the Vicar Dei and occupies a special place between the laymen and God, similar to the one of a saint. Therefore, the desire to preserve a dead pope’s body can be reasoned, both with practical, as well with spiritual reasons. The present report gives an insight on some of the practices used by the Catholic church for preservation of popes’ bodies.

Historical Methods of Body Preservation

The following is a list of some of the methods, historically employed for the preservation of the dead Pontiff. It is based on literary sources, such as the works of the 14th century physician Guy de Chauliac, who performed embalmings of popes, and even developed separate protocols for lean and for adipose bodies. Those methods were quite successful, and allowed a body to be viewed for up to eight days, without decay [16].

Washing and shaving

Immediately following the last rites, the body of the deceased Pope was washed with warm water, and his beard and head were shaved [8]. This may have resulted in the most superficial layer of the skin being scraped off, making the skin more susceptible to further treatment.

Treatment of the skin

The first recorded account of treatment of the body originates from Pascal II’s burial in 1118 [12]. The description (being “covered in balsam”) is similar to one of impregnation [16]. More details regarding the preparation include that the body was rubbed with heated wine, containing aromatic herbs. It was rubbed vigorously before being anointed for the last time with balsam [8].

Removal of internal organs

Emptying of body cavities was not unknown to medieval embalmers. This provoked pope Boniface VIII in 1299 to issue his bull *Detestande feritatis*, which prevented division and disembowelment of the body for the sake preservation or remote burial [3]. However, evidence exists, that the body of the dead pope might have been incised [11] in order to release fluid and/or gas from the abdominal cavity [17].

It seems that this bull and the taboo for evisceration were soon forgotten. It is known that between 1590 and 1914 the papal *praecorida* (a term for vital organs, i.e. heart and intestines) were removed and buried separately in the church of *Santi Vincenzo e Anastasio a Trevi*. Most probably this was done as a part of a more elaborate embalming procedure, involving some of the other methods described. In the 20th century, this practice halted. John Paul II, however (who explicitly opposed his embalming) had a part of his intestines, removed during surgery following his assassination attempt in 1981 placed in the same church [15].

Cleansing of the intestines

Because of the taboo on evisceration, methods for removal of the bacteria-infested intestinal contents were developed. They included an enema with a decoction of bitter apple and red borax to expel fecal matter, which was followed by another one, containing, among others, vinegar, rose oil, alum, aloe, myrrh, acacia, and nutmeg [17].

Sealing of the orifices

It is known that the anus, mouth, ears, and nostrils of the late pontiff were stuffed with cotton, wax, incense, and myrrh, aloe, and nutmeg, if available [8]. This was done mainly out of practical reasons, to stop putrid fluids from flowing out during the viewing of the body [16], but the conserving properties of the herbs and resins used should not be ignored.

Dressing

Since the Pope has to be buried in his liturgical vestments, his body is to be dressed in multiple layers of clothing, including trousers, shirt, hose, and tunic, followed by the belt and cincture, fanon, stole, short tunic, maniple, dalmatic, gloves, and pallium [8, 16]. The cloth of the garments can act as an absorbent for any fluids that might flow out of the body during purification. The innermost layers of cloth can also stick to the surface of the body, especially when there is treatment of the latter with balsam and resins [8, 12]. Upon drying out, the resin-soaked fabric can preserve at least the shape of the body.

Treatment with lime

Instead of being embalmed, it is known that Clement VI's body (died in 1352) was rubbed with lime to prevent quick decomposition during the transport to his burial place [16]. This method is in fact dehydration of the body, a prerequisite for long-term preservation, used since ancient times [19]

Site of burial

The first popes were buried near the tomb of St. Peter. Even though their tombs were described as "simple", they included a coffin a marble, brick, or terra-cotta, which more or less insulated the body from the elements. More recent burials included elaborate sarcophagi, made of marble or other stone [15]. They also provide a sealed environment, away from moisture and extreme temperature changes.

Contemporary Methods of Body Preservations

Treatment of the body

The 20th century records contain more detailed descriptions of the fate of the dead pope's body. Pius X was buried underneath St. Peter's basilica in 1914, and was not treated, as per his explicit wishes (9). His relics were subsequently recovered, declared incorrupt, and he was canonized as a saint of the Catholic church. The preservation of his body might have been a result of the conditions it was laid in (see below). When the body was removed from the tomb, in order to preserve it in the condition it was found, it was treated with a chemical solution. However, as it was claimed, this treatment re-

sulted in the skin turning brown. Pius X's remains are now covered in a bronze mask and vestments, covering this discoloration, with the current condition of the body being unknown [10, 14].

The embalming of Pius XII's remains (1958) created a significant controversy, due to the failed attempt to preserve the body using a process involving herbs and aetheric oils, following what was claimed to be an ancient tradition. The preservation was extremely unsuccessful, leaving the body of the pope decomposing and putrefying in front of the shocked faithful [18].

Pope John XXIII (died in 1963) was preserved using what we can call a modern method. The Italian anatomist Gennaro Goglia perfused the body with 10 liters of embalming fluid [2], reportedly containing ethyl alcohol, formalin, sodium sulphate and potassium nitrate [4]. In 2001, his body was recovered in an extremely good condition. To prevent subsequent deterioration, it was treated with solutions containing formalin, alcohols, camphor, nitrobenzene, turpentine, benzoic acid, and mercury bichloride, before it was displayed in a glass coffin [13]. The face was however hidden with a wax mask, despite it may not have been needed [4].

Subsequent popes of the 20th century (Paul VI and John Paul I) were also treated to a different degree with preserving fluids [10, 14]. After the botched embalming of Pius XII, the papal morticians most likely turned to formulas similar to the traditional modern mix of fixatives used for John XXIII as well. John Paul II was reportedly not embalmed, but only "prepared", without further details of the procedure being known [20]. Speculations exist, that this preparation might have involved rubbing the skin with a fixative [13]. Fixation of the skin might aid in preserving the appearance of the body, even if the soft tissues have decayed.

Site of burial

Since the 16th century, the body of the pope was first laid in a cypress coffin. The cypress coffin is in turns placed in a metal one, which is soldered shut. The two coffins are put in an elm one, which is nailed with golden nails, before being carried to its final resting place in an elaborate tomb, or a niche [15]. The triple coffin placed in a sarcophagus is a significant insulation of the dead body, keeping oxygen and moisture out, thus creating a microenvironment not dependent on external conditions.

Even the case of burial in "simple ground", as it was requested by Paul VI in 1978 [21] the set of coffins was laid to rest not in soil, but rather in the rammed rubble in the Vatican grottoes below St. Peter's Basilica [22]. Keeping the body away from water and heat can trigger a natural mummification process, with little or no help in terms of treatment.

Discussion and Conclusions

The methods, described above, surely served a very practical purpose – to preserve a dead body for the time of viewing [17]. However, the treated body, if given the right conditions, may not decay, but be rather preserved over time. This can explain the existence of a number of body relics, which can be viewed as incorrupt by the faithful, even though no such claim from church officials exists.

The death of a pope is a major and rather rare event. Therefore, the accounts of it are often quite detailed, and sometimes include a description of the treatment of the dead body. This is however not the case for the death of other individuals, having their bodies declared incorrupt long time after their passing. It is possible that some of those bodies were subjected to treatments, similar to the ones used for the pope's body, which

were poorly documented. It is nowadays known through forensic analysis, that embalment was a common practice for the elite in the Middle ages, and that the procedures were more or less standardized [5]. Therefore, the popes were not an exception, but were rather treated with the most modern and advanced procedures of their time. In the same time, other preserved relics might have been treated using similar widespread methods. A scientific analysis of such relics is needed in order to confirm or exclude this hypothesis.

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