

## MUMMIFIED SAINTS OF THE NORTHERN CROATIAN LITTORAL\*

### MUMIFICIRANA TIJELA SVETACA NA PODRUČJU SJEVERNOG JADRANA

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#### SUMMARY

*The Istrian town of Vodnjan hosts a collection of mummified bodies and relics. Three mummies are completely preserved and belong to Blessed Leon Bembo, St Giovanni Olini, and St Nicolosa Bursa, while the other three are mummified remains of St Barbara, St Sebastian, and St Mary of Egypt.*

*This article gives an overview of the three completely preserved bodies, including their external condition, hagiographic data, statements and hypotheses that need verification by future targeted scientific research. Although local populations attribute divine properties to the remains and treat their continued preservation as a mystery, their origin is probably similar to that of other mummified saints. A scientific study performed on the mummies will probably help to reveal the true origin and type of mummification of the bodies. Additional paleopathological research could also determine the cause of death, if the saints died by natural causes, or attest to any mutilation or sign of torture suffered in life and confirm them as the cause of death. Proper bioarchaeological research could bring useful osteobiographical updates to the existing records about these saints.*

**Key words:** Saints, mummy, paleopathology, bioarchaeology, Middle Ages, Istria

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## EUROPEAN MUMMIES OF SAINTS

European mummies occupy a significant place among the world-known mummies. They can be classified into several subgroups based on the type of mummification (natural<sup>1</sup>, partial and artificial mummification<sup>2</sup>), the purpose and time of mummification (from prehistoric mummies to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century modern mummies), and the place where they were found (natural niches, churches, catacombs, etc.).

Mummified bodies of saints make up a very specific and distinctive category among the European mummies. As the term “mummified” can be applied to any body part that still displays preserved soft tissue after a long postmortem interval (Aufderheide, 2003; Lynnerup, 2007), the non-skeletal body parts of Saints (*reliquiae*), scattered all around the world, can also be defined as fragments of mummies. In this respect, this category of mummies would be one of the largest in Europe. However, today the term is still being applied mostly to corpses preserved in their entirety. Consequently, this article is limited to completely preserved bodies hosted in the church of St Blaise in Vodnjan.

The preserved remains of saints can be grouped into three main time periods: the Roman period, the Middle Ages, and modern times (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century). While the remains belonging to the Roman times consist mostly of skeletal body parts of martyrs buried in catacombs and churches, medieval saints are more often found in a mummified state. These bodies were subjected to artificial mummification and make a specific category of preserved saints’ bodies (Fulcheri, 1996). In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, individual mummification was customarily performed on the bodies of religious leaders – popes and patriarchs (Quigley, 2006). The reasons for mummification changed with time, but shared one goal: to preserve religious consciousness among people and to facilitate the spread of Christianity in Europe. In fact, even though in past church authorities prohibited dissections and autopsies, they supported artificial preservation of the corpses of some ecclesiastical figures. According to Fulcheri (1996), this was done to facilitate transfer and prolong display of the corpses (preventing in this way natural

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<sup>1</sup> Basque mummies of saints, Portuguese clergy mummies, bog bodies, Austrian catacomb mummies, Austrian salt mummies, ice mummies of the northern countries, Irish catacomb mummies, Mound People Mummies, many Italian mummies

<sup>2</sup> Mummies of Spanish bishops, Franciscan friars from Basel, mummies of historical figures, Allen Burn’s mummies from Scotland, “Catacomb mummies” from Palermo, certain bodies from the Abbey of St Domenico Maggiore, certain mummies of Italian Saints

decomposition to take place in front of a crowd of devout people). Mummification was often kept secret to present the preserved bodies as the strongest evidence of God's grace and power, and to prolong veneration of the saints – *the holy incorruptible*. Later, a corpse was not deemed incorruptible if it had sustained any type of preservation procedure. Another practical effect of mummification in medieval times was the production of relics obtained from body parts during mummification. A great number of relics obtained by evisceration of the body was later distributed among Catholic churches and communities all around Europe to maintaining strong the presence of the Catholic Church in different communities.

However, mummification of the great majority of medieval saints was spontaneous (natural). This can be attributed to the favouring microclimate of churches and catacombs where the corpses were placed. Part of the mummified saints was preserved thanks to balms used during burial that enhanced natural mummification. Although there was no explicit intention to mummify these remains, the final result was a preserved, “mummified” body, whose preservation was consequently considered miraculous.

Therefore it is reasonable to expect the largest number of mummified saints to be concentrated in geographic areas that were under a strong Catholic influence in the past. Italy has the largest amount of preserved saints' bodies. Italian researchers are building and updating a database of Italian saint mummies, which now includes over 42 whole bodies and hundreds of relics (E. Fulcheri, personal communication, 2009). Mummified corpses of saints can also be found in Spain and Portugal (Aufderheide, 2003), although in much smaller numbers.

However, international literature rarely mentions mummified corpses kept in Croatia. These add to the world's great collection of mummies and are important scientifically, historically and religiously. Croatia is a Central European country located at the crossroads of the Pannonian Plain, Southeast Europe, and the Mediterranean Sea. Its western areas bordering with Italy, include the Istrian Peninsula, the Kvarner Bay, and the mountain region of Gorski kotar. The Kvarner Bay and Istria make the Northern Croatian Littoral. Being close to Italy and sharing historical circumstances were crucial for the arrival of mummies to the Croatian territory, which were all transferred from Italy, where mummification was quite popular in the Middle Ages (Fornaciari, 1998). In 1818, painter Gaetano Gresler brought a collection of mummified bodies to Vodnjan from Venice (Del Ton, 1929), saving them from the perils of the French Revolution that was followed by

an equally significant revolution in funerary customs in Italy and throughout Europe (Salice, 2006). The bodies were transferred to the church of St Blaise in Vodnjan, and from then on they became the symbol of the town and an important religious spot for the pious people of the region.

#### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MUMMIFIED SAINTS OF THE NORTHERN CROATIAN LITTORAL

The northern Croatian littoral counts three complete mummified corpses preserved in the Church of St Blaise in Vodnjan. In addition, the church keeps three partial mummified remains (belonging to St Barbara, St Sebastian, and St Mary of Egypt) and over 290 relics (Škrobonja 2009, Škrobonja & Kurtovic, 2006), mostly skeletal remains of over 250 saints, making Vodnjan the biggest sacral collection in Croatia (Jelenić 2004). The preserved bodies (*Corpi Santi*) cover quite a large medieval period; Blessed Leon Bembo dates to 1188, St Giovanni Olini to 1300, and St Nicolosa Bursa to 1512.

This article is limited to an introductory overview of the saints; it places them in their historical context, including hagiographic data, information and legends about their burial and preservation.

The mummies of Vodnjan belong to the medieval period when mummification was becoming more and more popular. However, there is no written evidence that any mummification procedure was performed on the corpses of Vodnjan. All the bodies had been transferred from their original burial location where they were also preserved. There are only vague indications as to where these original locations are, which limits our insight into the nature of their preservation.

The corpse of St Nicolosa Bursa (Figure 1) is currently placed in a wooden coffin dating back to the seventeenth century. The body is dressed in a monastic dress with a floral garland on the head. Only the head, hands, and feet are available for external examination, showing a high degree of preservation and clumsy subsequent attempts to keep it that way. These attempts were made to prevent the loss of facial parts, nose in particular. Along with the body, the coffin contains the abbess's rod and a document attesting to St Nicolosa's appointment as Abbess, signed by the Patriarch Antonio Surian in 1505.

A number of biographical data make it possible to reconstruct the life of St Nicolosa Bursa, born in Koper (Slovenia). In 1465 (probably in her ado-



Figure 1 - St Nicolosa Bursa

*Slika 1. Sveta Nikoloza Burza*

(Photo by / Foto: Ante Škrobonja)

lescence), she started serving as a nun in the Benedictine monastery of St Servolo in Venice and then became Mother Superior of a monastery near the Church of St John Lateran, where she died in 1512. Legend has it that Nicolosa Bursa performed many miraculous deeds in her lifetime. Although her body could have been naturally mummified, there are indications that can link her preservation to the Italian tradition of artificial mummification of religious personalities; Nicolosa lived in the times when most of the artificial mummifications were performed (between the 14<sup>th</sup> and late 15<sup>th</sup> century (Fulcheri, 1996)). In addition, of all people, nuns were most often subjected to mummification procedures, mostly belonging to the Italian region of Umbria and Tuscany (Fulcheri, 1996; Fornaciari et al., 2008). However, there is no written evidence to confirm this. Moreover, witnesses of the period described burials as having been performed in the common convent crypt located near an aqueduct, whose microclimate was probably humid and inappropriate for preservation. After the body was found completely preserved in 1526, it was transferred to a stone sarcophagus in the



Figure 2 - St Giovanni Olini

*Slika 2. Sveti Ivan Olini*

(Photo by / Foto: Ante Škrobonja)

Monastery of St Anna. Other openings of the sarcophagus followed, and evidenced each time the same state of preservation (Jelenić, 2000). According to legend, at the first opening of the tomb of Nicolosa Bursa, a pleasant fragrance exuded from the body, evidencing to the believers the divine recognition of the saint. In reality, this points to the use of unguents and spices at the burial, which probably helped to preserve the body. This case reminds of the mummy from Grottarossa. When the body of the mummy from Grottarossa was discovered, it emanated an aromatic odour that was later determined to be *juniperus*, confirming that the mummy was embalmed (Ascenzi & Bianco, 1998).

St Giovanni Olini (Figure 2) is displayed in the Church of St Blaise as a well-conserved body dressed in priest garments. There is also the Bull of Pope Boniface IX, who ordered the body to be examined and determined whether or not to approve its public worship “because the mysterious preservation of a body must not become the motive of its veneration”.

Giovanni Olini was born in 1215. During his life he was addressed as “The Living Saint” due to his commitment to the care of the sick and poor during epidemics. Although he was in close contact with the moribund and diseased, he died of “natural causes” at the age of 85. Shortly after his burial at the cemetery of St Sebastian, his corpse was transferred to a marble sarcophagus in a church near the monastery of St Lawrence, allowing people to pay tribute to him. Here the body was forgotten until 1398 when it was rediscovered in a state of complete preservation. The fact that people started to treat the “unknown” body as the body of a saint induced Pope Boniface IX to initiate the process of recognition of the body. The task was given to Msgr Francesco Bembo, who eventually attested that the mummy belonged to Giovanni Olini, making it possible for canonization to start (Jelenić, 2000).

Blessed Leon Bembo (Figure 3) is the third mummy in the church of Vodnjan. As with the corpses of St Nicolosa Bursa and Giovanni Olini, only facial structures are available for inspection, showing an average state of preservation. The body is dressed in the vestments of a bishop with a mitre that, however, does not belong to the period in which Leon Bembo lived.

Leon Bembo was born at the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Venice, where he had served as a priest at the Doge’s Palace until his appointment as ambassador to Syria, where he was afterwards elected bishop. After his death in the St Lawrence’s monastery in 1188, his body was transferred (by demand of Mons Giovanni Polani) to a marble sarcophagus inside the catacombs of the church of St Sebastian. The sarcophagus was first opened in 1207 and the body of Leon Bembo was found intact (Jelenić, 2000).

An interesting biographic fact that may prove useful for subsequent research on the body is that Leon Bembo, during the religious riots of the time, suffered from torture that procured him multiple fractures. Allegedly, these healed with no medical assistance and made Leon Bembo unrecognizable to people. Also of interest is the relation of the saint with the female convent of St Servolo (the convent where Nicolosa Bursa served as a nun) where, until his death, he had spent much of his time helping the nuns.

## CONCLUSION

At the time of the presentation of this study at the First Bolzano Mummy Congress, no biomedical/paleopathological research on the corpses of Vodnjan had yet begun. However, in 2009 a Commission for the Protection and Presentation of Mummies and Relics of the Church of St



Figure 3 - Blessed Leon Bembo (courtesy of Msgr Marijan Jelenić, parish priest of the Church of St Blaise in Vodnjan)

*Slika 3. Blaženi Leon Bembo (ljubaznošću vlč. Marijana Jelenića, župnika crkve Sv. Blaža u Vodnjanu)*

Blaise was established in Vodnjan that included representatives of the town of Vodnjan, church authorities, and specialist archaeologists, conservators, and physicians. The Croatian Conservation Institute initiated a project to determine the stage of decay and damage to the bodies in order to plan necessary actions for their preservation. In the month that followed, the corpses were moved to a new reliquary theca and imaged using computed tomography (results pending publication).

To this day, as in the past, many limiting factors are slowing down the pace of research. First, the mummies had been unknown to the general public for a very long time. Although known to the locals, they were first introduced to the general public in 1976. The lack of interest of competent institutions has mostly been associated with lack of funds that the Commission tried to surmount. The religious factor may also be slowing down research. These mummies are visited by a large number of pilgrims year-round. Religious people venerate the preserved bodies, *Corpi Santi*, assigning to them supernatural and healing powers. This cult stems from their state of preservation, which is believed to evidence divine intervention, and from a number of miraculous healings that have been attributed

to the bodies. The fear of losing this mystical and divine dimension of the corpses may obstruct further scientific research.

The greatest impediment to proper paleopathological and biomedical investigation, however, is the progressing decay of the bodies due to inadequate conditions (lighting, wormholes, visitors, great and sudden temperature oscillations).

The importance of biomedical research is evident. Mummies of saints are insignificant for a group/population analysis but important as individual cases (Fulcheri, 1996). A scientific study of these bodies would not only help to reveal the real nature of their mummification but, in case it was artificial, point out differences in mummification methods used over different historical epochs. Additional paleopathological research could possibly determine the cause of death of these saints, attest to mutilations or any sign of torture suffered by the saints (Bl. Leon Bembo), confirm them as the cause of death, and/or attest to the presence of pathogens and pathologies. Proper bioarchaeological research would also help to update the existing biographical records of the saints with new osteobiographical data gained from the remains of the mummies and skeletal relics.

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#### SAŽETAK

*Istarski grad Vodnjan čuva zbirku mumificiranih tijela svetaca i relikvija. Tri mumificirane relikvije potpuno su očuvana tijela bl. Leona Bemba, sv. Ivana Olinskog i sv. Nikolozе Burze, dok su preostale tri mumificirane relikvije nepotpuni ostaci sv. Barbare, sv. Sebastijana i sv. Marije Egipatske.*

*Članak daje pregled triju kompletno sačuvanih tijela, predstavljajući njihovo vanjsko stanje i očuvanost, hagiografske podatke, izvještaje iz vremena pronalaska mumija te hipoteze koje bi ciljane znanstvena analiza mogla rasvijetliti. Iako im tamošnje stanovništvo pridaje nadnaravne moći i smatra njihovo očuvanje božanskim djelom, njihovo je podrijetlo najvjerojatnije jednako kao i ostalih mumija svetaca koje se čuvaju u drugim europskim crkvama. Dodatna paleopatološka istraživanja mogla bi rasvijetliti uzrok smrti svetaca koji su umrli prirodnom smrću, utvrditi mutilacije i traume nastale tijekom mučenja i potvrditi ih kao uzrok smrti. Ciljana i svrsishodna bioarheološka analiza nadopunila bi sadašnje spoznaje i biografske podatke.*

**Ključne riječi:** *sveci, mumija, paleopatologija, bioarheologija, srednji vijek, Istra*

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