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978-1-108-06683-9 - A History of Egyptian Mummies: And an Account of the Worship and Embalming of the Sacred Animals by the Egyptians

Thomas Joseph Pettigrew

Excerpt

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A

## HISTORY OF MUMMIES.

## CHAPTER I.

## ON MUMMY.

*Etymology of the term Mummy—allusions to its Qualities—Abd'Allatif's description of natural Mummy—the opinions of Dioscorides, Serapion, Bomare, Sir William Ouseley, and Kæmpfer on this subject.*

THE word MUMMY has been variously derived. Bochart, Menage, Vossius, and others have derived it from the Arabic noun *موم* *mum*, meaning wax; and Avicenna defines it thus: “Mum purum est parietes domorum apum in quibus faciunt ova et pullos et advenit in eis mel.”\* But Salmasius derives it from *amomum*, a kind of perfume. Some authors believe the Arabic word *موميا*, *mumia*, to signify a body embalmed or aromatised.

The Persian word *موميا*, *múmiyà*, means bitumen, or mineral pitch, the

\* Avicennæ Opera, lib. ii., tract. 2, cap. 473.

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PISSASPHALTOS, which is generally found in the bodies embalmed by the ancient Egyptians.

The term mummy is mostly applied to the body embalmed, not to the embalming ingredients, and in such sense I shall employ it throughout this work.

Vossius explains mummy to mean the flesh of man preserved against corruption in balsam or myrrh, and aloes, and asphalt. Turton describes it as a bituminous liquor of the consistence of wax, found in sepulchres in which bodies have been embalmed.

In allusion to its qualities of softness, durability, power of preservation, &c., it has been employed by many writers in various ways.

As implying *softness* :

*Tib.*—"You shall grow *mummy*, rascals."

*Beaumont and Fletcher. The Sea Voyage, Act III., Scene 1.*

"Let some soft *mummy* of a peer, who stains  
 His rank, some sodden lump of ass's brains,  
 To that abandon'd wretch his sanction give ;  
 Support his slander, and his wants relieve !"

*Falconer. The Demagogue.*

*Falstaff.*—"I had been drown'd, but that the shore was shelvy and shallow ; a death that I abhor ; for the water swells a man ; and what a thing should I have been, when I had been swell'd ! I should have been a mountain of *mummy*."

*Merry Wives of Windsor. Act III., Scene 5.*

As denoting *permanency—durability* :

"Thy virtues are  
 The spices that embalm thee ; thou art far  
 More richly laid, and shalt more long remain  
 Still *mummified* within the hearts of men,  
 Than if to lift thee in the rolls of fame  
 Each marble spoke thy shape, all brass thy name."

*J. Hale's Poems (1646), p. 50.*

Probably in the sense of *durability* or *preservation*, it is used by Shakespeare when he makes Othello to describe the charmed handkerchief.

## ON MUMMY.

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“ A sibyl, that had number'd in the world,  
 The sun to make two hundred compasses,  
 In her prophetick fury sew'd the work :  
 The worms were hallow'd, that did breed the silk ;  
 And it was dy'd in *mummy* which the skilful  
 Conserv'd of maiden's hearts.”

*The Moor of Venice. Act III., Scene 4.*

Abd'Allatif, an Arabian physician who flourished in the twelfth century, describes mummy, properly so called, to be a substance that flows down from the tops of mountains, and which, mixing with the waters that carry it down, coagulates like mineral pitch, and exhales an odour resembling that of white (Burgundy) pitch and bitumen. “ Quant à la momie,” says this author, as translated by Silvestre De Sacy, “ proprement dite, c'est une substance qui découle du sommet des montagnes, mêlée avec les eaux qui l'entraînent ; elle se coagule ensuite comme la poix minérale, et exhale une odeur de poix blanche mêlée avec du bitume. Suivant Galien, la momie sort de source comme la poix minérale et la naphte ; d'autres disent que la momie est une variété de poix minérale, et on la nomme *menstrues des montagnes*. Cette momie qu'on trouve dans les cavités des cadavres en Egypte, s'éloigne peu de la nature de la momie minérale, et l'on peut en substituer l'usage à celui de la momie minérale, quand on a de la peine à s'en procurer.”\* But the learned translator in a note,† expresses his doubts as to the correctness of the reference to Galen, and hints that the description may have been taken from Dioscorides. This most likely has been the case ; for in looking into the writings of Serapion, who compiled his *Historia Simplicium Medicamentorum*‡ from the works of the Arabian and Greek physicians, especially those of Paulus Ægineta, Dioscorides, and Galen, I find the following citation from Dioscorides, under the head *De Pissasphalto*. “ Vocatur et in bituminis genere Pissasphaltus, quasi picibitumen dicas composita ex pice et bitumine re et rei appellatione. Nascitur ad Apolloniam quæ in Epiro est, fluminumque impetu ex Cerauniis montibus delatum in litora eructatur, glebarum modo concretum, odore picis bitumini mistæ. Potest Picibitumen omnia quæ

\* Relation de L'Egypte, 4to. Paris, 1810. Page 201.

† No. 133, p. 271.

‡ Edit. fol. Venet. 1552.

possunt mista simul Pix et Bitumen.”\* Again, in another work of the same author, *De Simplici Medicina*,† I find the following extract from Dioscorides under the head *Mumie*. “Mumia est in terris Apolloniæ: descendit namque ex montibus, qui ducunt flumina cum aqua, et ejicit eam aqua fluminis in ripis, et est coagulata, et fit sicut cera, et habet odorem picis mixtæ cum asphalto cum aliquo fœtore: et virtus ejus est, sicut picis, et asphalti mixtorum.‡

Ibn Baïtâr says that “the Múmiyá of the tombs, found in great quantities in Egypt, is nothing more than the amalgam anciently used by the Greeks to preserve their dead bodies from putrefaction.” He says also that the term Múmiá is given to a kind of light black stone found near Sen’á in Yemen, and which contains a black fluid substance in a small cavity.

Bomare§ gives an interesting note on the subject of liquid pitch from the mountains: “Gemelli Carreri dit que sur la route de Schiras à Bender-Congo, l’on voit la montagne de Darap, toute de pierre noire, d’où distille le fameux *baume-momie*, lequel devient noir en s’épaississant (du Pissasphalte, ou Asphalte). C’est le plus réputé en Perse; la montagne est gardée par ordre du Sophi; tous les ans les Visirs de Geaxoux, de Schiras et de Lar, vont ensemble ramasser le *baume-momie* qui coule et tombe dans une conque où il se coagule; on n’en tire pas plus de quarante onces chaque année; ils l’envoient au Sophi sous leur cachet. On voit au Cabinet du Roi les deux boîtes d’or remplies de ce bitume ou *baume-momie* que l’Ambassadeur de Perse apporta et presenta à *Louis XIV*; une autre boîte en argent, pleine de ce même bitume, fut donnée au Prince de Condé, on la voit dans le Cabinet de Chantilly. Ce présent n’avoit de mérité que dans l’opinion de ceux qui l’ont offert. L’ambassadeur de Perse dit a *Louis XIV*, que le *baume-momie* étoit un spécifique pour les fractures des os, et généralement pour toutes les blessures; qu’il étoit employé pour les maladies et ulcères tant internes qu’externes; en un mot, qu’il avoit la propriété de faire sortir le fer qui pourroit être resté dans les blessures. Ce fameux *baume-momie* qui est une espèce de *poix minérale*, distille des rochers en beaucoup d’autres contrées.”

\* Page 101. † Fol. Venet. 1503. ‡ Page 138. § Dictionnaire d’Histoire Naturelle, 8vo., Lyon, 1791. tom. VIII. p. 542.

The account given by Sir William Ouseley\* confirms in many particulars that just quoted. Sir William visited the Mummy Mountain (Kíeh Múmiáy) in the territory of Darábgerd in Persia. He fancied that it presented a darker appearance than the mountains adjacent to it. He says the mummy is a blackish bituminous matter, which oozes from the rock, and is considered by the Persians as far more precious than gold; for it heals cuts and bruises, as they affirm, almost immediately, causes fractured bones to unite in a few minutes, and, taken inwardly, is a sovereign remedy for many diseases. Sir William informed some of those who were thus describing to him the miraculous efficacy of the mummy that, after an experiment made on the broken leg of a fowl at Shiráz, Mr. Sharp, the surgeon, had declared that in his opinion the application of any common bitumen would have been attended with the same effect; but this they disbelieved, and asserted that mummy of an inferior quality might have been employed. Sir William quotes from a manuscript work of the tenth century (Súr al beldán) in which the mountain is described, and states that the mummy was gathered for the king, and that numerous officers were commissioned to guard it; that once in every year they opened the door of the cavern, in which was a stone, perforated with a small hole, and in this the mummy was found collected. The produce of the year amounted only to a portion of the size of a pomegranate, and it was sealed up in the presence of priests, magistrates, &c., and deposited in the Royal Treasury. This substance is also alluded to by other oriental writers, referred to by Sir William Ouseley, who concludes his account by stating that the eastern princes, both the giver and receiver, esteem a very small portion as a present of considerable value.

Mirza Abu'l Hassan brought to the Queen of England, in 1809, a portion of this mummy as a present from the King of Persia. The Empress of Russia received a like present, about an ounce, in a gold box.† A man at Isfáhán demanded nine tománs (about eight pounds sterling), and would not accept less, from a gentleman of Sir William Ouseley's party, for as much as could be contained within a common-sized walnut shell.‡

\* Travels, vol. II. p. 117.

† See M. de Ferrières Sauvebœuf Mem. Hist. &c., des Voyages., tom. II. p. 33. Paris, 1790.

‡ For further information on this subject, the reader may consult Kæmpferi, Amcenitates

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Kæmpfer states it as a popular opinion that the ancient Egyptians preserved the bodies of their Princes and chief personages by means of the natural mummy; for which they afterwards substituted, under the same name, a compound aromatic balsam.\*

The resemblance and supposed identity of the natural Mummy to the bituminous preparation found in the embalmed bodies of the Egyptians doubtless contributed to maintain its character and to enhance its value in the estimation of the Arabs.

*Exoticæ*, pp. 517, 519. Chardin's *Travels*. *Voyages de Corneille Le Brun*, Tom. I. p. 231. fol. Amst. 1718. Fryer's *Travels*, p. 318, and Father Angelo (*Gazophylac. Pers.*) p. 234.

\* *Amœnit. Exot.* p. 520.

## CHAPTER II.

### ON MUMMY AS A DRUG.

*Its use as a Drug—its introduction by Elmagar, a Jewish Physician—deceptions practised—Guy de la Fontaine's enquiries as to the supply of real Mummy—the demand for it, especially in France—Superstition of François I.—Opinions of various Authors as to the virtues of Mummy—Avicenna—Lord Bacon—Boyle—Olaus Wormius—Grew—Lemery—Ambrose Paré—Anecdote from Guyon, to account for the suspension of the traffic and cessation of the employment of Mummy in Medicine.*

IN the sixteenth and part of the seventeenth centuries, mummy formed one of the ordinary drugs, and was to be found in the shops of all apothecaries, and considerable sums of money were expended in the purchase of it, principally from the Jews in the East. No sooner was it credited that mummy constituted an article of value in the practice of medicine than many speculators embarked in the trade; the tombs were searched, and as many mummies as could be obtained were broken into pieces for the purpose of sale. The demand, however, was not easily supplied; for the government of Egypt was unwilling to permit the transportation of the bodies from their sepulchral habitation; too great temptation was thus created to the commission of fraud, and all kinds of impositions were in daily practice. According to the "Leçons de Guyon," as early as the year 1100, or as others say 1300, an expert Jewish physician named Elmagar, a native of Alexandria, was in the habit of prescribing mummy both for the Christians and the Mahometans, then in the East contending for the possession of Palestine. From that time, following the example thus set, physicians of all nations commonly prescribed it in cases of bruises and wounds. The asphalt and the bitumen it was contended consolidated and healed the broken and lacerated veins, and, its piquancy occasioning sickness, it was said to have the power of throwing off from the stomach

collections of congealed blood. Some Jews entered upon a speculation to furnish the mummy thus brought into demand as an article of commerce, and undertook to embalm dead bodies and to sell them to the Christians. They took all the executed criminals, and bodies of all descriptions that could be obtained, filled the head and inside of the bodies with simple asphaltum, an article of very small price, made incisions into the muscular parts of the limbs, inserted into them also the asphaltum and then bound them up tightly. This being done, the bodies were exposed to the heat of the sun ; they dried quickly, and resembled in appearance the truly prepared mummies. These were sold to the Christians.

Guy De la Fontaine, physician to the king of Navarre, took a journey into Egypt, and being at Alexandria in 1564 he made enquiries as to the supply of mummy as a drug. He communicated the result of his enquiries to his friend Ambrose Paré, the celebrated French surgeon, who made known the particulars to the public through the medium of his works. It appears that De la Fontaine sought out the principal Jew concerned in this traffic, and requested to see his collection of mummies. This was very willingly granted, and several bodies heaped one on the other were speedily shown to him. Enquiring as to the places whence they had been obtained, and anxious to know whether that which the ancients had written respecting the treatment of the dead and their mode of sepulture could be confirmed, the Jew laughed at him and hesitated not to say that all the bodies then before them, amounting to between thirty and forty, had been prepared by him during the last four years, and that they were the bodies of slaves or other persons indiscriminately collected. De la Fontaine then enquired as to what nation they belonged, and whether they had died of any horrible disease, such as leprosy, the small pox, or the plague, to which the Jew replied that he cared not whence they came, whether they were old or young, male or female, or of what disease they had died, so long as he could obtain them, for that when embalmed no one could tell, and added that he himself marvelled how the Christians, so dainty mouthed, could eat of the bodies of the dead. The Jew then detailed to De la Fontaine the mode of embalming adopted by him, which was in agreement with that just alluded to by M. Guyon.



The demand for mummy was greater in France than in any other country, and François I. is stated by Belon\* to have been in the habit of always carrying about with him a little packet containing some mummy mixed with pulverised rhubarb, ready to take upon receiving any injury from falls, or other accidents that might happen to him. Armed with this universal remedy, François I. thought himself secure against all danger.

The medicinal use of mummy is alluded to by Shirley the dramatist :—

“ Make *mummy* of my flesh, and sell me to the apothecaries.”

*The Bird in a Cage* (1633).

“ That I might tear their flesh in mammocks, raise  
My losses, from their carcasses turn'd *mummy*.”

*The Honest Lawyer* (1616).

Avicenna, one of the most celebrated physicians of antiquity, treats of the use of mummy in medicine. He describes it thus : “ *Mumia calida est in fine [tertii] sicca prout creditur in primo. Inest autem ei proprietas omnem spiritum confortandi (quod adijuvat continuativa viscositas).*”† He says it is subtle and resolute, useful in cases of abscesses and eruptions, fractures, concussions, paralysis, hemicrania, epilepsy, vertigo, spitting of blood from the lungs, affections of the throat, coughs, palpitation of the heart, debility of the stomach, nausea, disorders of the liver and spleen, internal ulcers, also in cases of poisons.‡ For contusions he speaks of it as the best of all remedies. “ *De medicinis autem quas oportet sumere illum, qui patitur contusionem, aut offensionem, aut casum melior, et antecedens est mumia pura cum oleo nominato sambacino et vino.*”§ It is prescribed to be taken in decoctions of marjoram, thyme, elder, barley, roses, lentils, jujubes, cummin seed, carraway, saffron, cassia, parsley, with oxymel, wine, milk, butter, castor, syrup of mulberries, &c.

Lord Bacon says,|| “ Mummy hath great force in staunching of blood ;

\* Observations de Plusieurs Singularitez, et Choses Memorables, &c. p. 261.

† De Viribus Cordis. Tom. II. p. 348, fol. ed. Venet. apud Juntas, 1608.

‡ Tom. I. lib. ii. p. 357. § Tom. I. lib. iv. p. 151.

|| Sylva Sylvarum, Cant. X. s. 980.

which, as it may be ascribed to the mixture of balms that are glutinous, so it may also partake of a secret propriety, in that the blood draweth man's flesh."

"Mummy," says Boyle, "is one of the useful medicines commended and given by our physicians for falls and bruises, and in other cases too."\*

Olaus Wormius speaks of mummy as beneficial in contusions, clodded blood, hard labour, &c.† But the sagacious Grew says, "Let them see to it, that dare trust to old gums, which have long since lost their virtue."§

Lemery|| describes mummy as detersive, vulnerary, and resolute, capable of resisting gangrene, good for contusions, and preventing the blood from coagulating in the body. He was alive to the deceptions practised in this article during his time, and gives directions for the choice of the "véritable mumie d'Egypte."

In the Pharmacopœia Schrodero-Hoffmanniana¶ are several formulæ of mummy as a drug, such as 1. Tinctura s. extract. mumie Quercetan. 2. Tinct. s. extr. mumie Crollii. 3. Tinct. alcalisata s. elix. mumie. 4. Alia tinct. seu arcan. carnis humanæ. 5. Ol. oliv. mumat. 6. Ol. exaltatum.

Ambrose Paré has a chapter expressly upon "Mummie," under the division of Contusions and Gangrenes. He speaks of mummy as the means upon which most dependence was placed in his time; but he states that neither the physicians who prescribe mummy, nor the authors that have written of it, nor the apothecaries who sell it, know any thing of certainty respecting it. After enumerating the opinions of Serapion, Avicenna, Dioscorides, his commentator Mathiolus, and Thevet, and showing the diversity of conjectures relative to it, he condemns its use in the following terms:—"This wicked kinde of drugge, doth nothing helpe the diseased, in that case, wherefore and wherein it is administered, as I have tryed an hundred times, and as *Thevet* witnesses, he tryed in himselfe when

\* Boyle's Works, vol. II. p. 451.

† "Magnus ejus usus est ad contusiones, sanguinis grumos dissolvit, partum faciliat, spasmus et convulsiones juvat, omnia interna et externa vulnera, exulcerationes, aliaque ejus generis curat. Permiscet aliis, vel seorsim, drachmam dimidiam exhibent." Museum Wormianum, fol. Amst. 1655, p. 344.

§ Museum Regalis Societatis, fol. Lond. 1681, p. 3. || Lemery (N.) Dictionnaire des Drogues Simples, 4to. Amst. 1716, p. 362. ¶ Fol. Genev. 1687, p. 609.