

KEN JEREMIAH

Christian Mummification

The Incorruptibles: Miraculously
or Intentionally Preserved Bodies



Apocalyptic Aperiodic
Èskathon Publishing

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Meta-curatorial doomsday project
Eschatological Hermeneutics of Doom Revelations

APOCALYPTIC APERIODIC SERIE

Published by: RMEDL | Èskathon Publishing

Èskathon Publishing | Apocalyptic Aperiodic serie | Philosophical Working Papers: An anthology of philosophical essays, articles and pamphlet in literary, non-literary and extra literary types, regarding apocalyptical, hermeneutic, escathologic and hermetic topics.

Concept Design, Edition Design, Curating: Radical Matters - Editions / Label | Sandro Gronchi

Date of publication: July 2012 | Catalogue number: RMEPAAS001

Online platforms: www.radicalmatters.com | www.radicalmatters.com/eskathonpublishing

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There are more than 300 bodies of saints, venerables, and beati on display in churches and cathedrals throughout Italy, and there are many more in other countries. Some of these bodies have been called Incorruptibles, and until recently, it was believed that they had been miraculously preserved. A book published in the 1970's describes one of the Incorruptibles, named St. Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297):

The sacred body of the Saint lies incorrupt in a glass-sided reliquary which exposes her to view, under the main altar of the Basilica of Cortona, named in her honor. The red velvet background of the reliquary is studded with precious gems and valuable ornaments donated by grateful clients. The body is light in color and dry, but completely whole. Even the eyes are full and all of the nails of the feet and hands are still in place: truly a miraculous preservation which has existed for almost seven hundred years [Cruz, 1977, p. 94].

It had been thought for many years that her preservation was due to an act of God, and that it could not be explained scientifically. However, when the body was recently examined by a pathologist and mummy expert, he found large incision-marks running across her thighs, abdomen, and chest. Her internal organs had been removed, and the body cavity had been stuffed with preservative plants and flowers. In addition, her skin had been treated with aromatic lotions (Pringle, 2001). She had been embalmed and eviscerated; yet believers who arrived to marvel at the sight of her miraculously preserved body were never told. They went on believing that the preservation was a miracle. The treatment of this body was not unique, and even today, the Church pays experts to preserve the bodies of important men and women, so that they will endure forever. St. Clare of Montefalco (1268-1320) was another such example. While she was alive, she told her fellow nuns that if they sought the cross of Christ, they only needed to look into the heart. The sisters took this suggestion literally, and after her death, they cut her open to examine her heart, looking for a cross. They did find some bodily tissue that resembled a cross, and they therefore believed that this was a miracle. Her body did not naturally decay either: a sign of another miracle. Joan Cruz (1977) wrote: "Clad in exquisitely decorated robes with a veil covering the face and a crown adorning the head, the relic was found during its last examination in 1968 to be dry but perfectly flexible. The exposed hands of the saint, only slightly darker than normal, appear perfectly formed" (p. 105). This miraculous preservation was recently investigated by a number of individuals, and she also had large incisions running across her body. She had been preserved in a manner similar to St. Margaret (Pringle, 2001). Initial investigations into her mummification did not reveal such incisions because examiners had not wished to undress her, considering that such an action would be improper.

Margaret of Metola (1287-1320) is another example of a body initially believed to be miraculously preserved. Joan Cruz (1977) described it:

The body of Bl. Margaret, which has never been embalmed, is dressed in a Dominican habit, and lies under the high altar of the Church of St. Domenico at Città di Castello, Italy. The arms of the body are still flexible, the eyelashes are present, and the nails are in place on the hands and feet. The coloring of the body has darkened slightly and the skin is dry and somewhat hardened, but by all standards the preservation can be considered a remarkable condition, having endured for over 650 years [p. 112].

However, there is no doubt that she had been embalmed and eviscerated after her death. The Church deliberately mummified her (Fallica, 2009). This same pattern, in which saints or other individuals were said to have been miraculously preserved, and then later found have been intentionally mummified is common. Bodies once considered miraculous, that are now known to have been artificially mummified include the corpses of St. Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444), St. Rita of Cascia (1381-1457) and St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). The pope announced St. Rita's beatification in 1627, 170 years after her death, and the remains were unearthed so that they could be examined. The Church reported that her body looked as though she had just recently died. It had a natural color and smelled like flowers. This floral scent is often noticed around the bodies of Incorruptibles, and it has been called the Odor of Sanctity by clergy members. The preservation of St. Rita's body was deemed to have been caused by God. It was not disclosed by the clergy that her body had been intentionally mummified. Her internal organs were removed, and the body was embalmed with a solution made from plants and flowers, which gave the body a floral scent (Jeremiah, 2012). Different types of embalming solutions have been used by the Church in order to mummify its members. The use of arsenic based solutions keeps the skin a rosy red color, although it tends to stiffen the body. Other embalming solutions can keep the bodies flexible and moist. In modern times, the Church still continues to embalm members of the clergy and other individuals that it deems important. In the past, Egyptian style mummification was typically utilized for high-ranking members of the Church, but other types of preservation were also used. Sometimes, bodies were treated with preservative-saturated cloths, or placed into baths of embalming solutions, which were then drawn into the body. In other cases, embalming was secretly performed, and the incisions were hidden. One way in which this secret embalment could be performed is by introducing the fluid through the popliteal artery, located behind the kneecap (Quigley, 1998). Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi (1566-1607) was likely mummified in this manner, as embalming fluid leaked from behind her knees for many years.

Nuns, who did not know what it was, collected the floral scented liquid in jars, believing that it was a miraculous occurrence (Minima, 1958). Not all of the Christian mummies have been examined, so it is unknown if all of them had been intentionally preserved. From what is known, it seems likely that all of the mummies were artificially preserved. Some indications of intentional mummification include the following: the bodies maintain their color, as though they were still alive, they retain their flexibility, and they have the so-called Odor of Sanctity, which is how members of the clergy described floral-scented embalming solutions. An interesting question is why the Church values the preservation of the dead: Why do they take action to prevent the natural processes of decay? Certainly, it could have to do with the mummification of Jesus. After his death, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pontius Pilate for his body, and the request was granted. He was joined by Nicodemus, who brought 75 pounds of aloe and myrrh in order to preserve the body. Both materials were used for embalming, and myrrh was favored by the Egyptians. According to the Gospel of John: “They took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews” (19: 40). However, beside the preservation of their savior, there are other reasons behind intentional mummification in Christianity, including the necessity of the body during the forthcoming rapture, as described in the Bible. In addition, in early Christian beliefs, the soul was composed of multiple parts, like the Egyptian view of the soul (Jeremiah, 2012). While part of the soul traveled to heavenly realms, part of it remained with the body. This is why believers wished to pray in front of the physical remains of saints. They thought that the power inherent in the remains could affect miracles. This explains another unusual Catholic custom: the distribution of body parts. Holy individuals are cut up after death, and parts of their bodies are sent to various churches and cathedrals. It is thought that the body parts have holy energy within them, and they can thereby sanctify a location and cause miracles. There are other reasons why bodies are artificially preserved by the Church, all of which are treated in the book *Christian Mummification: An Interpretive History of the Preservation of Saints, Martyrs, and Others* (McFarland, 2012). However, it is interesting to consider the prevalence of mummification in cultures throughout the world. All societies seem to want bodies preserved. The preservation of such bodies perhaps makes the change from life to death seem less drastic. The mummies themselves are a physical reminder of the finite nature of life, and of the inevitability of death. They are also a constant reminder of the virtues of the individuals embalmed. As such, they are used as exemplars, suggesting qualities that others can aspire to cultivate.

About the Author:

Ken Jeremiah has written extensively about spiritual and historical phenomena. His articles have appeared in various publications, such as Kansai Time Out, The Journal of Asian Martial Arts, and Southern New England Golfer. His previous books include *Living Buddhas: The Self-Mummified Monks of Yamagata, Japan* (McFarland, 2010), and *Christian Mummification: An Interpretative History of the Preservation of Saints, Martyrs and Others* (McFarland, 2012). More information about him can be found at:

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