

JOHN WESLEY AND THE STRANGE CASE OF THE FRENCH MUMMIFIED TEENAGER¹

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In the first issue of the *Arminian Magazine*, John Wesley announced that its primary objective would be to counter what he saw as the spread of the doctrine of “Particular Redemption,” or predestination.² Thus, each issue would follow the same four-part outline: a defense of the doctrine of justification (or, as he put it, “the Universal Love of God, and his willingness to save all men from all sin”); an extract of the life of a “holy man, whether Lutheran, Church of England-man, Calvinist, or Arminian”; “thirdly, accounts and letters, containing the experience of pious persons, the greatest part of whom are still alive”; and, finally, “verses explaining or confirming the capital doctrines we have in view.”³ The formula was modified three years later, in 1781, when John Wesley decided to insert more diverse pieces, such as original sermons, extracts from diaries or developments on a particular topic.⁴ Another significant change was the introduction of biographies and autobiographies of common believers—or, as John Wesley called them, “part of the life of some of those real Christians, who, having faithfully served God in their generation, have lately finished their course with joy.”⁵

However, one can also find other features in the *Arminian Magazine* which do not fit into these categories laid out in 1778, such as for example, medical advice⁶ or information which do not seem to have any religious edifying interest.⁷ The 120th issue of the magazine offers such a piece.

In this issue, published in December, 1787, an article entitled “An

¹ I wish to thank again the Oxford Center for Methodism and Church History (Oxford Brookes University), and in particular Dr. Peter Forsaith and Prof. William Gibson. They warmly welcomed me to Oxford and gave me the opportunity to make extensive research for this article as part of my Visiting Research Fellowship at the OCMCH. I also wish to thank Ms. Marie Bèche-Wittmann, Assistant Director of Clermont-Ferrand’s *Musée Bargoïn*, for granting me access to its collection of manuscripts related to this case. Finally, all my thanks to Prof. Catherine Bréniquet, Professor of Antique Archeology and Art History at Clermont Auvergne University, for guiding my research in her field of expertise.

² “To the Reader,” *Arminian Magazine* 1.1 (January 1778): iv–v.

³ “To the Reader,” *Arminian Magazine* 1.1 (January 1778): v–vii.

⁴ For example, “An Exposition of the three great Articles of the Creed, by the late Mr. Charles Perronet,” *Arminian Magazine* 4.5 (May 1781): 275–278.

⁵ “The Preface,” *Arminian Magazine* 4.1 (January 1781): v.

⁶ E.g.: “A Method of saving Frozen Limbs, By a Native of Russia,” *Arminian Magazine* 8.4 (April 1785): 222; or “A Remedy for the Palsy,” *Arminian Magazine* 8.6 (June 1785): 327.

⁷ See for example “Thoughts upon Baron Montesquieu’s Spirit of Laws,” *Arminian Magazine* 4.4 (April 1781): 206–209; or “How to refrain Mad People,” *Arminian Magazine* 11.2 (February 1788): 100.

Account of a remarkable Mummy”⁸ gives John Wesley the opportunity to comment on a strange anecdote taking place in eighteenth-century France. The present article studies the account presented by the *Arminian Magazine* and gives the reader more information than what was provided in 1787. The essay also discusses the reason(s) which may have led the *Arminian Magazine* to feature this piece and concludes with what we have learned since its publication.

The Facts as Presented by the *Arminian Magazine*

The article in question is quite short and is comprised of 424 words, taking approximately one page and a half. In the context of the December, 1787 issue of the *Arminian Magazine*, its length is not surprising since it is preceded and followed by one-page or two-page articles.

The article describes a strange discovery “some persons” made “in a field near Rion [*sic*],⁹ in Auvergne” of a sort of heavy sarcophagus made of stone “which seemed to be granite.” The dimensions are given as “seven feet long, three broad, and eight inches in depth.” Inside the sarcophagus, a leaden coffin was found, which contained the body of a boy of twelve or thirteen, “so well embalmed, that the flesh was still flexible and supple.” The balm which had been used emitted a very strong smell which “communicated . . . to those who came near it, long after the coffin was taken out.” The linen and the members of the body were covered with this balm or paste. The body was also holding balls of this mixture in his hands. Finally, his arms and legs were covered with bands, and “a kind of shirt covered the breast and belly, and over all was a winding sheet.”¹⁰

The coffin was taken to the parish priest and then to Riom “by the order of the Intendant of that place.”¹¹ The article describes various medical observations made by a surgeon (in Riom, presumably) and emphasizes, in particular, the suppleness of the body.¹² It also describes two curious experiments whose goal seems to have been to demonstrate that the unusual suppleness of the body was due to his being “embalmed in a quite different manner from that of the Egyptians, whose mummies are dry and brittle.” The essay notes,

[A] surgeon making an incision in the stomach, one of the bye-standers put in his

⁸ “An Account of a remarkable Mummy,” *Arminian Magazine* 10.12 (December 1787): 645–646.

⁹ The city is in fact spelled Riom, the former capital of the Duchy of Auvergne until 1531, when the Duchy was merged into the royal estate. In John Wesley’s time, Riom was the political and judicial capital of the Generalty of Auvergne, and the population of the city was approximately 11,300 inhabitants in 1763 (Louis Messance, *Recherches sur la population des généralités d’Auvergne, de Lyon, de Rouen, et de quelques provinces et villes du Royaume*, Jean-Baptiste-François de La Michodière ed. [Paris: Durand, 1766], 205). Today, the population of Riom is roughly 19,000 (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1405599?geo=COM-63300>, DOA: April 12, 2018); the city is home to one of the 36 French Courts of Appeal (*cours d’appel*).

¹⁰ “An Account of a remarkable Mummy,” 645.

¹¹ “An Account of a remarkable Mummy,” 646–647. The Intendant was the royal officer at the head of one of the twenty-four Generalities.

¹² “An Account of a remarkable Mummy,” 646.

finger, and could feel the diaphragm, the great lobe of the spleen and the liver. About twelve inches of the jejunum being likewise extracted, and tied at one end, it was inflated by blowing in it, as readily as if it had been that of an animal just killed.

The article concludes by noting that nothing “was found, that might discover the time when it was deposited in this place.”¹³

The reader cannot but notice how sober John Wesley’s account is, despite the very strange and unusual particulars of the case. While it is true that articles featured in the *Arminian Magazine* were sometimes written in such a detached way, one is surprised that Wesley did not take advantage of such a mysterious incident to resort to the gift of telling “excellent stories” which Sir Walter Scott mentioned as characterizing Wesley’s oratory.¹⁴ We will now see that the facts as reported by the *Arminian Magazine* also represented an accurate but incomplete report on the mummy of Les Martres-d’Artière.

A Sensational Case in Eighteenth-Century France: The Les Martres-D’Artière Mummy

The mummy whose discovery is recounted by the *Arminian Magazine* in 1787 had in fact been discovered long before that. It caused a great deal of interest at the time and even attracted the interest of King Louis XV and of Count de Buffon, the famed naturalist.

On February 4, 1756, two brothers, Michel and Barthélémy Bassin, were cultivating their field in the little parish of Les Martres-d’Artière, sixteen kilometres east of Riom in the present-day Puy-de-Dôme *département*¹⁵ when one of them felt his spade had met a large stone. Surprised by the incident—the land was notoriously devoid of stones, let alone big ones—he and his brother dug a hole around the object and discovered that this was really a sort of sarcophagus made of crudely cut stone.¹⁶ Unable to move the heavy stone on top of it, they decided to dig a hole on the north side of the object and managed to take out of it a leaden box (seven feet long, three feet broad and eight inches high).¹⁷ By now convinced they had discovered a treasure, the two men discreetly took the 350-lb object home to open it away from anyone’s view. Much to their surprise, they discovered it contained the body of a boy of about fourteen whose embalming had been so efficient that the body had kept it supple.¹⁸ Embarrassed by such a discovery, they decided to bring the coffin back where they had found it and to put the field back

¹³ “An Account of a remarkable Mummy,” 645.

¹⁴ John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1873), vol. 5, 202.

¹⁵ In 1793, the population of Les Martres-d’Artière was 649 habitants. In 2015, the population was 2,263 (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3293086?geo=COM-63213>, DOA: June 15, 2018).

¹⁶ Pierre(-François) Fournier, “La Momie des Martres-d’Artière,” *Revue d’Auvergne* 77.413 (Apr.–Jun. 1963): 97, 101.

¹⁷ *Histoire de l’Académie royale des sciences, année MDCCLVI, avec les Mémoires de mathématique & de physique pour la même année, Tirés des registres de cette académie* (Paris: L’Imprimerie royale, 1762), 47.

¹⁸ *Histoire de l’Académie royale des sciences*, 46.

as it was before.

However, it seems that they did not manage to keep quiet about it and local officials had the tomb dug out on February 11, 1756.¹⁹ The mummy was then displayed for several days in the local church; a multitude of people from the neighborhood came and looked at it, which proved to be a calamity since many of them insisted on taking relics from what they imagined to be the body of a saint miraculously preserved.²⁰ The bishop of Clermont, François-Marie de La Garlaye, eventually intervened to put an end to these disturbances and ordered the boy to be (re)buried in the local cemetery, which was done on February 18. A few days later, Intendant Jean-Baptiste-François de La Michodière ordered the body to be exhumed so that men of science could examine it. The bishop finally consented on February 22 and the body was then transported to the hospital of Riom, where the balm was analyzed by Mr. Strope, surgeon and apothecary,²¹ and the experiments were conducted as described in the *Arminian Magazine*.²²

News of the discovery reached Paris and Louis XV let it be known that he desired to see the mummy, which was duly transported to Versailles on April 24, 1756. At the request of the King, Georges-Louis de Buffon²³ examined the body and minutely described it in his *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*,²⁴ commenting in particular, “never before had something as marvelous as this been seen: this is the masterpiece in the art of embalming and the most perfect of all the mummies known to the present day”²⁵ and “there is very reason to believe that this mummy was made for a very important man, and that it is very ancient; the embalming would be remarkable even in Egypt: it is very

¹⁹ Pierre(-François) Fournier, “La Momie des Martres-d’Artière,” 100.

²⁰ This is reported by Dr. Bourlin, a physician who examined the mummy at Riom. Bourlin recorded, “Récit de la découverte qu’on a faite en Auvergne au mois de février mil neuf cent cinquante six d’une momie qu’on a trouvée dans un champs des appartenances des Martres d’Artières, village distant de trois lieues de la ville de Riom au sud est,” (MSS, *Musée Bargoin* collection), 5. See also Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Legrand d’Aussy, *Voyage fait en 1787 et 1788 dans la ci-devant Haute et Basse-Auvergne* (Paris: Imprimerie des Sciences et Arts, [1795]), vol. I, 50.

²¹ Mr. Strope’s Letter to Mr. Morand (14/9/1756) (MSS, *Musée Bargoin* collection), 34. See also *Recueil périodique d’observations de médecine, chirurgie, pharmacie etc.*, Charles-Augustin Vandermonde (ed.) (Paris : Chez Vincent, 1756), vol. 4, 290–299.

²² *Histoire de l’Académie royale des sciences*, 48.

²³ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707–1788) whose *Natural History* (originally published as *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, [1749-1804]) is a landmark in the history of natural sciences was made a Count by Louis XV in 1773. He was a member of the British Royal Society, among other learned societies.

²⁴ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme, Tome III* (1749) in *Œuvres complètes de Buffon, Anselme-Gaëtan Desmarest & Jean-Vincent-Félix Lamouroux* (eds), New Edition (Paris: Verdrière & Ladrangé, 1829), vol. 15, 73-81.

²⁵ “Jamais on n’a rien vu d’aussi merveilleux dans ce genre : c’est le chef-d’œuvre de l’art des embaumements et la plus parfaite de toutes les momies qui ont été connues jusqu’à présent,” Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme*, 72. Author’s translation.

surprising in Auvergne.”²⁶ He concluded by noting that the period could not be determined, although it was obviously very ancient. He also observed that the method was totally different from the Egyptians (the viscera had not been taken out, nor alkali introduced in the body in order to tan it from the inside)²⁷ and also “more perfect” since the body had been discovered in an excellently-preserved state.²⁸ To this day, the reason why the body was so well preserved is not entirely clear. In 2000, Dr. Patricia Soto-Heim argued that the leaden coffin, in conjunction with the balm (made of aromatic vegetal powders and either bitumen of Judea or pissasphalt) may explain this.²⁹ It should be noted that the body was so well-preserved that physicians at the time of its discovery thought the mummy was some 500 years old when it was really more than 1,000 years old.³⁰ A similar case of an extremely well-preserved body in a leaden coffin inside a sarcophagus, found in September 1908 in a Gallo-Roman cemetery in Bourges, would confirm this explanation.³¹

The *Arminian Magazine* was thus essentially correct, although not as complete as it could have been. There is also a noticeable discrepancy between the sober way in which John Wesley reported this case, and the great interest it had provoked in France in 1756. We now turn to the question of why this article was included in this issue of December, 1787. As we will see, several hypotheses can be put forward.

Why Was the Article Published?

The first thing a reader might notice is the gap between the events related and the date the article was published in the *Arminian Magazine*, twenty-nine years later. Could it be that John Wesley had only discovered the story at this later date?

As has been seen, the case of the mummy had been reported in France by Buffon, and also by the French Royal Academy of Sciences (*Académie royale des sciences*) which had published a two-page description of the mummy and of its discovery as part of its proceedings in 1762.³² It is highly

²⁶ “Il y a tout lieu de croire que cette momie a été faite pour un homme très important, et qu’elle est fort ancienne; l’embaumement serait remarquable en Égypte même, il est très surprenant en Auvergne,” Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme*, 79. Author’s translation.

²⁷ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme*, 80.

²⁸ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme*, 81.

²⁹ Patricia Sotot-Heim, “La momie des Martres-d’Artière” in *Dossiers d’archéologie* (April 2000): 55.

³⁰ *Recueil périodique d’observations de médecine, chirurgie, pharmacie etc.*, 296. Cf also Patricia Sotot-Heim, “La momie des Martres-d’Artière” in *Dossiers d’archéologie* (April 2000) : 54. Dr. Bourlin observes that the mummy has “probably died a few centuries ago” (“mort sans doute depuis quelques siècles”). Bourlin, “Récit de la découverte qu’on a faite,” 5.

³¹ Daniel Mater & Daniel Témoin, “La Momie du Fin-Renard,” *Mémoires de la Société des antiquaires du Centre*, vol. 33 (1910), 2. I’m grateful to Prof. Catherine Bréniquet for providing me with this reference.

³² *Histoire de l’Académie royale des sciences*, 47–48.

probable that John Wesley did not see either of these French books,³³ although we know he read French well enough to translate and adapt writings from the Abbé de Saint-Cyran into English.³⁴ In fact, John Wesley's source (whether direct or indirect, one cannot say) is clearly the report run by *The London Chronicle* in the spring of 1762 which is quoted almost verbatim by the 1787 article, up to the erroneous dimensions of the tomb, and the sentence concluding the 1787 article (identical in both texts), "No inscription on the coffin or linen, no medal, nor any symbol whatever, was found, that might discover the time when it was deposited in this place."³⁵ John Wesley was undoubtedly familiar with *The London Chronicle*, to which he wrote three letters in 1760–1761, and one in 1784.³⁶ Of course, John Wesley may well have seen the article well after it had originally been published (it may have been shown to him afterwards) or he may have waited for a good opportunity to share the story with his readers.

The second question is the purpose behind such a publication. I noted earlier that the *Arminian Magazine*, despite having been ostensibly launched for furthering the cause of Arminianism, also featured articles which did not clearly aim at the reader's religious edification. In my view, this article contributed to another goal dear to Wesley's heart, namely the instruction of his disciples. Such a goal was, for example, at the heart of his editing the 50-volume *Christian Library* from 1749 to 1755 which he urged his preachers to "frequently read in public and enforce select portions of" as he himself did.³⁷ There is no doubt that this article represents an interesting scientific case (as Buffon himself made clear), not to say a scientific enigma, which could well interest curious minds, as it continues to this day.

Another purpose could be entertainment, if one can use the word, since the article did not provide any answers or solutions to this intriguing case, the reader can imagine anything.³⁸ In fact, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such an anecdote could be used as the starting point of a TV series

³³ There is no reference either to Buffon or to the French Royal Academy of Sciences in the Bicentennial edition of his works, nor in Telford's edition of his letters.

³⁴ See André de Winne, "John Wesley, l'abbé de Saint-Cyran et la perfection chrétienne : étude historique d'un emprunt textuel," (M.Div. dissertation, *Institut protestant de théologie*, faculty of Montpellier, 2016–2017), *passim*.

³⁵ *The London Chronicle* (May 29–June 1, 1762), 515. Riom is however correctly spelled in the 1762 article.

³⁶ See John Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 21, 277–280, 295–296, 303–308 and vol. 22, 473.

³⁷ "I wish all our preachers both in England and Ireland would herein follow my example and frequently read in public and enforce select portions of the Christian Library," Entry for May 13, 1754 in John Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 20, 486.

³⁸ This is so true that the website of the city of Les Martres-d'Artières refers to this story as "260 years ago, Roswell in Les Martres-d'Artière" ("*Il y a 260 ans, Roswell aux Martres-d'Artière*"): <http://www.les-martres-dartiere.reseaudescommunes.fr/fr/actualite/4161/il-y-260-ans-roswell-martres-artiere> (DOA: April 13, 2018). The reference is to the infamous video of the alleged autopsy of an extraterrestrial creature said to have taken place in or near Roswell, New Mexico, and which was broadcast on Fox TV (in the US) in November, 1995 ("Autopsy or Fraud-topsy?", *Time Magazine* (November 27, 1995), <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,983764,00.html> (DOA: April 13, 2018)).

or a detective novel.

We are obviously left to imagining what John Wesley's reasons were for inserting this story in the *Arminian Magazine*. As a matter of fact, he does not refer anywhere else to the French mummy. He may have been frustrated by the fact that no explanation could be given to the presence, in the middle of the Auvergne countryside, of "the most perfect of all the mummies known to the present day."

It is surprising that John Wesley does not seem to have inquired of further French sources on this mummy, which would have allowed him to give more details to his readers. The more complete contemporary accounts mentioned above would have allowed him to develop a theme which would undoubtedly have been most edifying to his readers: the contrast between the frenzy of the French villagers which tore out pieces of flesh and of linen from the mummy in order to keep so many relics, on the one hand, and the reasoned and scientific attitudes of the French Academy of Sciences and the Comte de Buffon on the other hand. Such a gap between a superstitious (or should one say even idolatrous?) French peasantry and the pre-Revolutionary enlightened ruling class could have been an interesting thing to reflect on.

In the last part of this article, I will now turn to elements which John Wesley could not have been aware of, but which may be of interest to present-day readers.

What We Know Now

I noted above that John Wesley may have been frustrated by the fact that nothing could be known further about this teenager. Today, more than 260 years after the discovery of the Bassin brothers, the mystery is not solved, but we now know more about the mummy, presently stored in Paris, at the *Musée de l'Homme*.

Scientists can now say it probably dates from the end of the Gallo-Roman period (2nd-4th century AD), especially since a very similar mummy was discovered in Naintré, in the Vienne *département*, in 1998.³⁹ The Naintré mummy could definitively be dated as belonging to the Gallo-Roman period thanks to memorabilia which had been stored in the coffin.⁴⁰ In addition to this, a similar leaden coffin containing a skeleton was discovered in Les Martres-d'Artière in 1862,⁴¹ which gives substance to the area being somehow associated with burials in the Gallo-Roman period,⁴² although reasons remain unknown. The use of leaden coffins put inside stone or wooden sarcophagi in Gallo-Roman burials is much documented.⁴³

Finally, Buffon's assertion that the teenager was an important person

³⁹ Patricia Sotot-Heim, "La momie des Martres-d'Artière," 54, 55.

⁴⁰ Bui Thi Maï & Michel Girard, "Pollens, ultimes indices de pratiques funéraires évanouies" in *Revue archéologique de Picardie*, 2003 (special issue n° 21), 129.

⁴¹ Patricia Sotot-Heim, "La momie des Martres-d'Artière," 54.

⁴² Pierre (-François) Fournier, "La Momie des Martres-d'Artière," 103.

⁴³ Arcisse de Caumont, *Abécédaire ou rudiment d'archéologie, Vol. II : Ère gallo-romaine avec un aperçu sur les temps préhistoriques*, 2nd ed. (Caen: F. Le Blanc-Hardel, 1870), 549-550.

seems to have been proved right since the techniques and the products were the same as those used by Egyptians in first-class embalming.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In December, 1787, the *Arminian Magazine* presented an account of the strange discovery of a mummified teenager in the French province of Auvergne thirty-one years before. The account was correct although incomplete (maybe for want of space or simply for the sake of brevity) and concluded on the impossibility of knowing the actual context in which this teenager had been mummified and his body buried where it was discovered, inside a coffin itself contained in a sarcophagus. At any rate, the more complete accounts by Count de Buffon and the French Royal Academy of Sciences did not contain elements which would have allowed them to reach conclusions in this direction either.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, we can nonetheless be surprised that John Wesley did not use the opportunity of the case of the French mummy to give his readers a more edifying story, one that could have allowed them to reflect on the link between faith and reason.

⁴⁴ Patricia Sotot-Heim, "La momie des Martres-d'Artière," 54, 55.