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## In Rennes, a new vision of the history of death

From 2011 to 2013, an Inrap team, under curation by the State (Drac Bretagne), conducted an integral preventive excavation of the Jacobin convent, the site of the future Rennes Métropole conference center. Constructed in 1369, this Dominican convent became one of the principal burial sites for the parliamentary aristocracy of Rennes. Approximately 900 burials were unearthed by the archaeologists, including that of Louise de Quengo, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Lady found mummified in her lead coffin.

Today, Rozenn Colleter, an Inrap researcher affiliated with the Molecular Anthropology and Computer Generated Imagery laboratory (CNRS/Université Toulouse III – Paul Sabatier), and her colleagues, are revisiting the exhaustive study of 606 of these graves and refute the formerly accepted hypothesis that funeral practices were secularized from the Middle Ages to the Modern period. They present their findings in an article in *PLOS ONE*.

### Lead coffins and hearts

During the excavation, the Inrap archaeologists unearthed five lead coffins and five lead urns. The latter contained hearts. Their inscriptions were compared with archives and permitted the identification of seven individuals, all nobles.

Four of the lead hearts bear inscriptions dating from 1584 to 1655, showing that this practice continued for nearly 70 years. Among the five hearts contained in the urns, four are very well preserved and bear evidence of embalment.

One of the lead coffins was that of Louise de Quengo, a benefactor of the convent who was more than 65 years old when she died on March 10, 1656. Her very simple religious attire attests to a desire to be associated with a church dedicated to the poor. The heart of Toussaint de Perrien, her husband, was set on top of her coffin. He had died seven years before her and was buried 200 km from Rennes in a convent that he had founded. The study of the body of Louise de Quengo shows that only her heart was removed.

### Study of a deceased population from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century

Archaeologists distinguish two burial periods at the Jacobins convent.

The individuals buried from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century show no evidence of post-mortem interventions.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century, approximately 1250 subjects were interred, 483 of whom were studied in depth. According to the archives of the time, which mention the burial of 113 subjects, nobles composed 74% of this population, clergy members 8%, and 4% were of the Third Estate, the rest being undetermined.

Among the 483 remains studied, only 18 subjects (twelve complete skeletons, one cadaver and five hearts) and 18 scattered bones bear evidence of post-mortem interventions (craniotomy, opening of the thorax and/or the abdomen and/removal of the heart).

### Secularized death in the Modern era?

The evolution of funeral practices from the Middle Ages to the Modern era is considered as a process of secularization. Certain interment procedures that were initially religious and reserved for kings during the Medieval period, would have been gradually extended to many nobles with the intention, very contemporary, of preserving the body and presenting a peaceful image of the deceased to the family.



At the Jacobins convent, however, at which many nobles were buried, only 2.7% of the sample bears evidence of post-mortem intervention. Furthermore, these interventions, craniotomy and heart removal, are acts that mutilate the bodies. The influence of religious dogma is very visible. In the case of Louise de Quengo and her husband, the burials were inversed and complementary – the heart of one with the body of the other and vice versa – and thus prove the attachment between the spouses. The two religious centers of which they were benefactors are also honored. The multiplication of burial sites increased the number of masses and prayers honoring the dead. In addition, removing just the heart represented a middle ground between numerous funeral services and the integrity of the body advocated in the papal bull issued by Boniface VIII in 1299.

We also know that lead coffins, which had been known since the end of Roman times, were intentionally ostentatious and preserved bodies that had not been treated, which was a sign of saintliness. The intention was clearly to preserve the body, but not to display it. This practice was also valorized by Council of Trent, which equated the Resurrection of the Flesh with the resurrection of flesh.

A multidisciplinary approach, with medical examiners, radiologists and anthropologists contributing to the work of archaeologists, permitted an exhaustive study of this convent in Brittany and a new vision of the history of death.

### **References**

Rozenn Colleter, Fabrice Dedouit, Sylvie Duchesne, Fatima-Zohra Mokrane, Véronique Gendrot, Patrice Gérard, Henri Dabernat, Éric Crubézy, and Norbert Telmon. 2016. Procedures and Frequencies of Embalming and Heart Extractions in Modern period in Brittany. Contribution to the evolution of ritual funerary in Europe. PLOS ONE.

<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/doi?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0167988>

### **Inrap**

With more than 2,000 collaborators and researchers, Inrap is the largest archaeological research institute in France and one of the most important in Europe. Each year, this national research institute realizes approximately 1800 archaeological diagnostic operations and 250 excavations in partnership with private and public developers in metropolitan France and its overseas territories. Its missions also include the scientific study and diffusion of the results and the transmission of archaeological knowledge to the public.

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