

An Unusual Case of Body Mummification

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Summary. The hanged and completely mummified body of a 31-year-old man was found in one of his house cellars—a fully occupied 3-family house—14 months (433 days) after he had vanished from home. The investigation carried out locally, the questioning of the house tenants and the post-mortem examination itself brought light to this unusual affair. In every case, suicide was then considered. This case illustrates also how in colder and humid climates, mummification—in its natural aspect—is made possible under certain favourable conditions.

Zusammenfassung. Ungefähr 14 Monate (433 Tage) nach seinem Verschwinden wurde die vollständig mumifizierte Leiche eines 31jährigen Mannes aufgehängt im Keller seines Hauses — ein bewohntes Dreifamilienhaus — gefunden. Die Ermittlung am Ort, die Vernehmung der Mieter sowie die Autopsie gaben eine glaubhafte Erklärung für diesen ungewöhnlichen Vorfall. Die Behauptung, es sei Selbstmord gewesen, wurde aufrechterhalten. Der Fall zeigt, daß selbst in mehr kalten und feuchten Gebieten die Mumifizierung auf natürliche Weise nicht ausgeschlossen ist, soweit die Verhältnisse dort dafür geeignet sind.

Key word: Mummification.

A mysterious case of body mummification was reported in the Antwerp judicial area (Belgium).

In the early days of 1972, a wife reported to the police the disappearance of her 31-year-old husband. Search was made at once but the man was not to be found.

The man's body was discovered—in one of the house cellars—(a house occupied by three families) by the wife and the house proprietress, 14 months later (433 days).

The victim was hanged by means of a piece of plasticized telephone wire hooked up to the grid of the cellar.

The hanging had been carried out atypically and incompletely; the hanging "point" was located underneath the chin, the half-seated body—whose right shoulder reached the wall—rested on a heap of old newspapers (Fig. 1).

The body was entirely mummified and was so well kept that its identification could have easily been made at a distance (Figs. 2 and 3).

The question was being raised at once. How could a human body be concealed for such a long time in a house cellar occupied by three families? On the other hand, how can a mummification of this kind be possible in such circumstances?

On the grounds of the investigation carried out on the spot and the questioning of the house tenants, an acceptable explanation was found in relation to this unusual case.



Fig. 1. A typical and incomplet hanging in the well ventilated and dry cellar



Fig. 3. Well preserved body making identification very easily

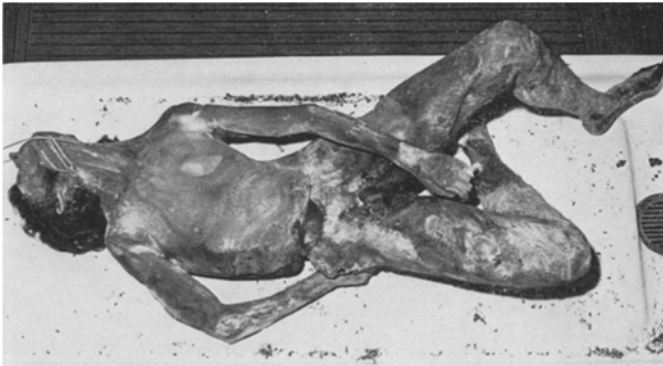


Fig. 2. Entirely mummified body 433 days after death

First, it was learnt that the wife had never entered the cellar, only had the husband entered it occasionally.

Furthermore, the body was concealed behind a huge heap of old newspapers and cardboard boxes piled up by the husband, so that the body could not be seen upon entering the cellar.

The body could not have been seen from along the street side, due to the fact that the cellar window was covered with a long sheet of brown paper.

During summer, the wife would have smelt something, the house tenants, however, had claimed to have never smelt anything. The man's body was then found for the first time, when the wife decided—one day—to clean away the cellar with the house proprietress's assistance, they started to remove both boxes and newspapers.

No traumatic lesions suspicious of murder were reported in the course of the post-mortem examination. There were no indications for an intoxication. Changes in height and weight could not be proven, because the exact measurements previous to death were unknown to us. According to information received, the husband was suffering from a nervous breakdown due to difficult financial problems.

Suicide was then considered. As a result of the investigation, it seems that the conditions of the area where the suicide was committed were particularly favourable to the drying—up of a human body. The closet that looks on to the street was sealed off by means of a non-tightly closed grid, whereas the wooden cracked door (both upper and lower parts) led on to the cellar corridor.

Taking into account that a large ventilation system was located between the cellar corridor and the garden, air circulation was therefore facilitated, this point was disclosed in the course of the police investigation.

No smell of decomposition was reported, not even near the man's body. It was then established that the cellar was very dry. The cellar was 2 m deep below street level. The temperature was 17°C and the humidity was 35 %. No trace of wet stains or mouldiness were seen on the walls.

Mummifications of the bodies of adults in colder and humid countries is unusual if not rare.

The case we have just described illustrates that mummification—in its normal aspect—is nevertheless possible, provided that conditions are favourable. This may be the case, when a body remains a long period of time in a dry and ventilated place. In such circumstances, the decomposition process is slowed down, while both drying—up and autolysis of tissues prevail.

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