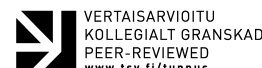


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https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/1/vare_et_al_fame.pdf**Fame after Death: The Unusual Story of a Finnish Mummy and Difficulties Involving its Study****Tiina Väre**

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Abstract

The cool, ventilated milieus beneath the floors of old Finnish churches are responsible for the natural mummification in church graves. One good example of such preservation are the remains of an early 17th-century vicar of Kemi parish, Nikolaus Rungius. He died in 1629 and was put to rest under the old Keminmaa Church in Finnish Lapland. The parish began exhibiting his preserved body in the 18th century after which Vicar Rungius – a locally revered man of cloth in life – gained wide posthumous fame. His dead body became a powerful means to encourage and strengthen people's faith. The mummy has maintained a human form but has lost its right forearm. On top of that the computed tomography scanning conducted in 2011 revealed that the head was not normally attached. It is unclear when it happened or how but a suspicion arose that once the neck was damaged the head could have fallen to the ground and shattered. A serious concern was whether the head of the mummy was really that of Vicar Rungius as a headless vicar would undoubtedly have prompted a substitution with another mummified head in order to maintain a powerful incentive to the parishioners' faith.

Church Burials and Mummification

With the consolidation of Christianity in the 13th to 16th century, the elite in the Swedish Österland and Eastern parts of Norrland (later Finland) gradually adopted a centuries-old Christian habit of burying their dead beneath churches. Initially, the grave sites beneath churches were reserved for the clergy, but fairly soon these church burials became popular also among the other members of the elite and peaked in volume during the 17th and 18th centuries. (Talve 1988; Lempiäinen 1990a; Paavola 1998, 36.)

Church doctrine deems the burial site as irrelevant to the salvation of the soul. However, among the parishioners a church burial was considered more prestigious and consequently was more expensive providing extra income to the parishes. Such burial became a way to show off one's wealth and status. Even underneath the floor the site and the type of the grave were significant, as the order beneath the floor reflected that above it. Below the floor – in some cases merely centimetres from the feet of the parishioners – the deceased were close to their loved ones, and hence, more likely to be remembered. Additionally, a peaceful rest was better guaranteed beneath the churches than in the poorly maintained churchyards of the period. During winter, when the ground was frozen solid, temporary burial in church was naturally also a practical option. (Cajanus 1927, 29–30; Pylkkänen 1954, 40; Rimpiläinen 1971, 333–334; Talve 1988; Havia and Luoto 1989, 569–570; Lempiäinen 1990a; Paavola 1998, 44, 46.)

The practice had raised controversy from the beginning. In Northern Ostrobothnia it was discontinued by the end of the 18th century, and finally prohibited in 1822 after more than a century of increasing opposition by the most eminent authorities from the both state and church. (Pihlman 1988; Nilsson 1989, 156; Lempiäinen 1990a; Paavola 1998, 40–43, 87, 112–115.) Yet, the prohibition was not always obeyed and the last church burials date to nearly a century later (Cajanus 1927, 30; Satokangas 1997).

As a consequence of this practice, some of the deceased ended up in cool, ventilated environments that preserved their soft tissues (Paavola 1998, 148; Núñez, Paavola and García-Guixe 2008). Due to this there still are mummified human remains in several old Finnish churches built prior to the late 18th century. In the old Keminmaa Church in Finnish Lapland (Figure 1) such conditions led to the natural mummification of the remains of a late vicar of Kemi (now Keminmaa), Nikolaus Rungius (ca.1560–1629). These remains are probably the most famous example of natural mummification in Finland, although even in the same church there are also more perfectly preserved remains.



Figure 1. The old stone church of Keminmaa was built in the early 16th century. It is located in the delta of Kemi River in Keminmaa, Finnish Lapland. In summer time the mummified remains are still exhibited to tourists in the church. Photo: Tiina Väre, 2011.

The remains of Vicar Nikolaus Rungius

The parishioners must have become aware of the mummification of Vicar Rungius' remains by 1704, when a new coffin was ordered to replace the old, rotten one (The Church's income and expenditure accounts 1700–1716 [Oct. 9, 1704] IITI:2, General ledger, Archives of Kemi parish, OMA; Itkonen 1976, 20; Kallinen 1990). Vicar Rungius was not particularly well-known priest during his life but his fame spread only after his death as apparently already in the 18th century the parish began to exhibit his preserved body to anyone interested (Huurre 1983; Kallinen 1990; Vahtola 1997).

According to local lore Vicar Rungius had preached “If I speak the truth, my corpse will not decay” (e.g. Fellman 1906, 324). There are very few preserved written records from his time, and no transcripts of his sermons have survived. Therefore, it is unclear if he did indeed say what is generally claimed. Nevertheless, he and his parishioners may have been aware of the mummification processes taking place in the church graves since it was not an uncommon event. At least other priests may have been buried underneath the church before Vicar Rungius (Paavola 1997; Paavola 1998, 77–78). Whenever a new burial was made, the parishioners could catch a glimpse of those buried earlier – especially, as some of the caskets were equipped with opening devices (Paavola 1998, 146, 157, 162). At the time it was even common for vergers or other parish employees to conduct crypt tours – often against a small fee (Paavola 1998, 147; Olsson 1956, 18–19). Perhaps the vicar, too, was expecting such a fate for his remains, and may even have believed that the preservation of flesh in the church graves actually took place through divine intervention. After all, before the rise of modern scientific thought this was often the accepted explanation for many otherwise inexplicable occurrences now known to be natural (e.g. Numbers 2003). However, the possible role of the coldness in the preservation of the remains was suggested already in the 1860s (Calamnius 1868, 201).

Vicar Rungius' dead body defying the rules of nature served as a living proof that encouraged and strengthened the people's faith – much in the same way as the saintly “incorrupts” of the Catholic Church, but in a full Lutheran environment and nearly two centuries into the Reformation. It is likely that the legend about his incorruptibility only came about when the mummified state of his remains became apparent and the remains could be used to attest the veracity of the Church doctrine (Cajanus 1927, 28; Kallinen 1990).

Current State of the Remains

The remains of the Vicar are no longer in pristine condition. In 1892 a bishop's visitation report stated that they had been damaged by both rodents and men, and that the coffin should be equipped with a lock. It appears that since then the parish representatives have had control over the access to the remains, whereas prior to this they could rather effortlessly be reached by anyone. (Minutes of the Bishop's visitations [Sep. 17, 1892], The Collection of the Diocesan Chapter of the Diocese of Oulu Eb: 32, OMA; Itkonen 1976, 14; Oikelmus 1950; Kallinen 1990.)

The mummy is for example missing its right forearm (Figure 2), which is already mentioned in a story published in 1868. Local stories explain what happened in various ways: Sometimes the mummy was vandalised by a lazy sexton or drunken trespassers, whereas in other versions the forearm had been taken as a souvenir by an anonymous American visitor. (Calamnius 1868, 201–201; Castrén 1894, 58; Cajanus 1927, 28; Kallinen 1990.) The latter story agrees with the fact that in the past human remains were highly valued for both magical and medicinal purposes (Heikkinen 1969, 27–34; Tittonen 2008) and for example Egyptian mummies were looted as souvenirs for centuries (Aufderheide 2003, 518,

521). Additionally, the popular pigment still used in the 19th century, appropriately known as “mummy brown”, was manufactured using the grinded body parts of mummified individuals (Woodcock 1996).

The computed tomography (CT) imaging of Vicar Rungius’ remains conducted in the spring 2011 revealed the loss of six cervical vertebrae (C1–C6) (Niinimäki et al. 2011; Väre et al. 2011; Figure 3). This led to suspicions of also the head having become fully detached from the rest of the body at some point. The mummified tissue is relatively frail, and it is possible that both the forearm and the neck have damaged while lifting and moving the mummy to a new coffin, which is something that undoubtedly has taken place several times during the past three centuries (Itkonen 1976, 20; Kallinen 1990).



Figure 2. The mummy of Vicar Rungius no longer has its right forearm. Although several stories explain what happened, the actual cause of the damage ripping off the tissues of the forearm and leaving the proximal end of his right humerus bare is unknown. Photo: Tiina Väre, 2011.



Figure 3. The computed tomography imaging conducted on the remains revealed six cervical vertebrae to be missing (red circle) above the seventh which is indicated by a red arrow. Already the external appearance is peculiar as the head is resting directly above the rib cage. Photo: Tiina Väre, 2011. CT image: Jaakko Niinimäki, 2011.

Considerations of Authenticity

Over the centuries the mummy has functioned as an unofficial tourist attraction and was probably even an important revenue source to both the locals hosting the tourists, and the parish, which collected fees from the visitors eager to get a glimpse of the famous mummy that proved the Bible’s truth. However, there is no absolute certainty about whether these particular remains actually have belonged to Vicar Rungius, although in a document dating to 1728 the burial site of the vicar has been indicated to be the same as where these remains had been found (Cajanus 1927, 28–29; Kallinen 1990).

Regardless, the damages on the head and neck region raised the question of whether the mummy’s present head was really that of the Vicar’s. If indeed the head had become detached and fallen to the ground, it may not have survived undamaged as even living skull bones break and shatter easily on impact. In such case a headless vicar may have prompted the substitution with the head of another mummy in order to maintain what was seen as a strong incentive to

the faith of the parishioners. Centuries of burials beneath the Keminmaa old church would also have produced an abundant supply of potential substitutes of mummified body parts. Between 1698 and 1784 around 100 individuals were buried under it. In 1799 once the new church of the parish was completed the burials under the old church restarted after a short break and probably continued until the turn of the 20th century. (Paavola 1997; Cajanus 1927, 30; Satokangas 1997; Paavola 2009.) This was much in defiance of the general 1822 prohibition, but also the bans of burials in unused churches in 1871 and 1879 (Lempiäinen 1990b; Paavola 1998, 43, 86–87). As the premises inevitably became increasingly full with burials the older remains were removed to make room for the new (Itkonen 1976, 21; Paavola 1998, 46, 168–172). To this day, there are several disarticulated bones left lying around underneath the floors of old churches (Väre et al. 2014).

During the period of church burials, the dead and the living were obviously much closer to each other. As with death itself, the handling of the deceased might not have been such a taboo as it is to most of us now. Even going to visit one's relatives, at least during other burials, may not have been considered of bad taste or macabre (Paavola 1998, 146). According to statements of later parishioners, in some churches the clothes of the deceased in church graves had even corroded due to frequent touching by curious visitors (Ojanlatva 1997). This does not, however, mean that the relationship between the dead and the living would have been straightforward. On the contrary, it was defined by complicated ambivalent attitudes toward the deceased, whose powers were also feared (Koski 2011, 89–90, 94–97, 240–243). We must bear in mind that also Vicar Rungius' mummy was not in its present glass-lid coffin before the 1950s but could be visited at the original burial place under the chancel (Oikelmus 1950; Kallinen 1990), where the lighting must have been very dim (Cajanus 1927, 23). If the substituting of the head would have actually taken place, it may have remained unnoticed by everyone except those involved in the accident or repairing of the remains.

Enhancing or even fabricating mummified remains is not unheard-of. As in the case of Vicar Rungius, mummified human remains – or their counterfeits – have been used to reinforce the establishment many times in the course of history. (Aufderheide 2003, 159–161, 534–536.) Vicar Rungius' case bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the case of the alleged mummy of the Prince of Viana (1421–1461), which served as an important symbol of Catalonian identity. A recent thorough study of these remains revealed that the mummy had eight lumbar vertebrae instead of normal amount of five, and that there was other evidence of manipulation. Moreover, DNA analyses finally confirmed that the mummy comprised of the remains of three different individuals, none of which showed any genetic affinities to the prince's undisputed relatives. (UAB 2008.)

In comparison to the Prince of Viana, the case of Vicar Rungius' remains was less problematic. No additional body parts were recovered and no evidence of manipulation surfaced in the studies although the missing tissues around the neck suggested that the head may be separate. However, as the data obtained from the CT imaging allows recurrent investigations, we are able to further scrutinize the scans layer by layer in order to exhaustively detect every lesion or anomaly. Thus, we have confirmed that although the skin and other tissues are badly torn in the region of the head, neck and back, there appears to be continuous narrow band of soft tissue still connecting the head to the torso (Figure 4). This means that while the damage allowed the cervical vertebrae to fall out, the head never became fully detached but remained conjoined through this strip of soft tissue, which obviously implies that the head is original and belongs together with the rest of the mummy.

Even if the remains have belonged to one single person another question that arises is whether we are, indeed, dealing with Vicar Rungius' mummified remains as there still is no proof of the mummy's authenticity. Although nothing in our studies suggests otherwise, in absence of further proof there is a possibility that the remains assumed to have belonged to the vicar may actually be someone else's.

Figure 4. The red arrow is pointing at the strip of soft tissue connecting the head and torso verifies that the head of the mummy is original. Photo: Jaakko Niinimäki, 2011/2014.



Significance of the “Mummy of Rungius”

It is, after all, debatable whether the significance of Vicar Rungius' remains depends upon their authenticity. It may not be what makes these remains interesting to tourists or meaningful to the local parish people. Rather, their significance lies on what they represent: that is the stories, personal meanings, reinforcement of the local identity and, perhaps above all, the consolidation of faith connected to them throughout the centuries.

In the 18th century, when most legends concerning him presumably arose (Kallinen 1990), his fellow men of cloth started to write about him (Calamnius 1868; Fellman 1906, 324; Cajanus 1927; Itkonen 1976). During the 20th century Vicar Rungius and the faith of his remains was discussed rather widely in the national press. In the 1940s, during the World War II the mummy was even used in war propaganda and especially in the 1970s and 1980s the schism concerning whether it is suitable to publicly exhibit the remains got attention in the press. This also made the local lore connected to the remains available for broader audiences. (Borg 1944; Maunula 1974; Knihtilä 1982; Huurre 1983; Kallinen 1990.)

To this day the mummy still continues to be an important attraction to tourists passing by or heading to the Kemi area in the summer time. Today his visitors are not charged. Yet still in the early 1980s an entrance fee was collected and the revenue used to organize the maintenance of the old church and to hire the tourist guides (Knihtilä 1982).

After such a long coexistence with the local people the mummy may be considered as a part of their local identity as well as an important source of tradition. Additionally, to a modern visitor it functions as a reminder of the limitedness of our earthly existence. To others the appeal of the remains seen as a concrete proof of the power of faith over death is undoubtedly deeply religious. Such aspect is further substantiated by the religiously inclined legends explaining the preservation. These religious implications connected to the remains of Vicar Rungius also strongly advocated for the continuation of their exhibition when the ethicalness of this activity was under debate. (Maunula 1974; Knihtilä 1982;

Kallinen 1990) After all, as Cajanus (1927, 28) has maintained, in its own way Vicar Rungius' dead body is still spreading the gospel.

There are several other mummified human remains whose study could further enlighten the past living conditions. However, at the moment their research is hindered by various practical problems. For instance, the fragile mummified tissues combined with rotten coffin materials and the confined spaces under the churches complicate the procedures related to CT studies. Additionally, when the research involves human remains it requires discrete consideration of ethical issues. To begin with, it is always important to adhere to respective demeanour towards the subjects but once the research is dealing with deeply personal aspects of human life such as the bodily functions or the health also the importance of anonymity is highlighted. In a way the unusual history of the remains of Vicar Rungius puts them in a special position when it comes to consideration of the research ethics. The curio-nature of his remains may be even further emphasized if the possibility of their research is denied. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic general guidelines concerning the research ethics and standards have been created to support the study of archaeological human remains (Code of ethics, BABAO). In any case, the information gathered through paleopathological study may be relevant even in terms of developments of modern medical research.

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Abstrakti

Kuolemanjälkeisestä maineesta: epätavallinen tarina suomalaisesta muumiosta ja sen tutkimiseen liittyvistä ongelmista

Vileä, hyvin tuulettu ympäristö vanhojen suomalaisten kirkkojen lattioiden alla luo olosuhteet luonnolliselle muumioitumiselle kirkkohautoissa. Hyvänä esimerkkinä tällaisesta säilymisestä voidaan pitää 1600-luvun alkupuolella eläneen Kemin seurakunnan kirkkoherran Nikolaus Rungiuksen muumiota. Kirkkoherra kuoli vuonna 1629 ja hänet haudattiin Suomen Lapissa sijaitsevan Keminmaan vanhan kivikirkon alle. Hänen muumioitunut ruumiinsa on seurakunnan toimesta ollut näytteillä 1700-luvulta lähtien, minkä jälkeen kirkkoherra Rungius – jo eläessään paikallisten kunnioittama kirkonmies – saavutti laajalle levinneen kuolemanjälkeisen maineen. Hänen ruumistaan tuli merkittävä keino rohkaista ja lujittaa ihmisten uskoa. Muumio on säilyttänyt ihmismuotonsa, mutta menettänyt oikeanpuoleisen kynnärvartensa. Sen lisäksi vuonna 2011 suoritettu tietokonetomografia paljasti, ettei muumion pää ollut normaalisti kiinni torsossa. On epäselvää, milloin ja miten pää on irronnut, mutta sen irtoaminen herätti epäilyksen, että niskan vahingoituttua pää oli saattanut pudota maahan ja rikkoontua. Olikin pohdittava, onko muumion pää todellakin kirkkoherra Rungiuksen, sillä kirkkoherran päättömyys olisi epäilemättä nopeasti johtanut pään korvaamiseen jollain toisella muumioituneella päällä seurakuntalaisten uskon vaikutusvaltaisen kannustimen säilyttämiseksi.