



HAL
open science

“ John Wesley and the strange case of the French mummified teenager ”

Jérôme Grosclaude

► **To cite this version:**

Jérôme Grosclaude. “ John Wesley and the strange case of the French mummified teenager ”. *Methodist History*, 2020, LIX (1), pp.43-50. hal-01919278

HAL Id: hal-01919278

<https://hal.science/hal-01919278>

Submitted on 13 Jan 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**JOHN WESLEY AND THE STRANGE CASE OF THE FRENCH MUMMIFIED
TEENAGER¹**

JÉRÔME GROSCLAUDE

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 4-part outline: a defence 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 somehow 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

¹ I dedicate this article to my very brilliant student Mélody M. (1998-2018) whose violent death left a great void in our midst: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,/Nor the furious winter’s rages;/Thou thy worldly task hast done,/Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages” (*Cymbeline*, IV, 2)

I also 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.

² “To the Reader,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. I-1 (January 1778), iv-v.

³ “To the Reader,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. I-1 (January 1778), pp. v-vii.

⁴ E. g.: “An Exposition of the three great Articles of the Creed, by the late Mr. Charles Perronet,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. IV-5, (May 1781), 275-278.

⁵ “The Preface,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. IV-1, (January 1781), v.

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 advice,⁶ 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 Account of a remarkable Mummy*”⁸ gives John Wesley the opportunity to come back on a strange anecdote taking place in 18th-century France. The goal of the present article is to study the account presented by *The Arminian Magazine* (I) and give the reader more information than what was provided in 1787 (II); I will conclude by discussing the reason(s) which may have led *The Arminian Magazine* to feature this piece (III).

I. THE FACTS AS PRESENTED BY *THE ARMINIAN MAGAZINE*

The article in question is quite short: 424 words, taking approximately one page and a half. In the context of the December 1787 issue of *The Arminian Magazine*, it is nothing 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”: 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 12 or 13, “so well embalmed, that the flesh was still flexible and supple”. The balm which had been used let out 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

⁶ E. g.: “A Method of saving Frozen Limbs, By a Native of Russia,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VIII-4 (April 1785), 222; or “A Remedy for the Palsy,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. VIII-6 (June 1785), 327.

⁷ See for example “Thoughts upon Baron Montesquieu’s Spirit of Laws,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. IV-4, (April 1781), 206-209; or “How to refrain Mad People,” *The Arminian Magazine*, vol. XI-2 (February 1788), 100.

⁸ “An Account of a remarkable Mummy,” *The Arminian Magazine*, Volume X-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 about 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, 2020); the city is home to one of the 36 French Courts of Appeal (*cours d’appel*).

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 priests 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”: “[A] surgeon making an incision in the stomach, one of the bye-standers put in his 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 John 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 John 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.

II. A SENSATIONAL CASE IN 18TH-CENTURY FRANCE: THE LES MARTRES-D’ARTIÈRE MUMMY

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 24 then Generalities.

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

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 & Cy, 1873 [1st edition: 1837-1838]), V, 202.

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, 16 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 sarcophagus¹⁶ made of crudely cut stone. 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 inches long, three inches 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 out of anyone's view. Much to their surprise, they discovered it contained the body of a boy of about 14 whose embalming had been so efficient that the body had kept its suppleness.¹⁸ Embarrassed by such a discovery, they decided to bring the coffin back into the tomb and to put the field back as it was before. However, it seems that they did not manage to keep quiet about it and the local parish priest, Father Guillaume, with the assistance of the 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 look 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

¹⁵ In 1793, the population of Les Martres-d'Artière was 649 habitants. In 2015, it was 2,263 (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3293086?geo=COM-63213>, DOA: April 12, 2018).

¹⁶ “En 1756 Deux paysans découvrent un corps momifié au bord de l'Artière.”

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.

¹⁹ “En 1756 Deux paysans découvrent un corps momifié au bord de l'Artière.”

²⁰ “Momie des Martres-d'Artière : des manuscrits offerts au musée Bargoin pour percer le mystère,” <https://www.clermontmetropole.eu/actualites-et-agendas/toute-lactualite/detail/actualites/momie-des-martres-dartiere-des-manuscrits-offerts-au-musee-bargoin-pour-tenter-de-percer-le-myste/> (DOA: April 13, 2018).

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 analysed by a chemist, and the experiments were conducted as described in *The Arminian Magazine*.²¹

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 Buffon²² examined the body and minutely described it in his *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*,²³ 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”²⁴ 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 surprising in Auvergne”.²⁵ 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)²⁶ and also “more perfect” since the body had been discovered in an excellently-preserved state.²⁷ 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).²⁸ It should be noted that the body was so well-preserved that the

²¹ *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, p. 48.

²² 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.

²³ 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. XV, 73-81.

²⁴ “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. My translation.

²⁵ “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. My translation.

²⁶ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*, 80.

²⁷ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*, 81.

²⁸ Patricia Sotot-Heim, “La momie des Martres-d’Artière” in *Dossiers d’archéologie*, April 2000 (issue n° 252), 55.

contemporary thought the mummy was some 500 years old when it was really more than 1,000 years old.²⁹

The Arminian Magazine was thus essentially correct, although not as complete as it could have been. We can also notice a discrepancy between the sober way in which J. 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.

III. WHY WAS THE ARTICLE PUBLISHED?

The first thing which could surprise the reader is the gap between the events related and the date the article was published in *The Arminian Magazine*, 29 years later. Could it be that John Wesley had only discovered it late?

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 1762.³⁰ It is highly probable that John Wesley did not see either of these French books,³¹ although we know he read French well enough to translate and adapt writings from the Abbé de Saint-Cyran into English.³² 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 1762³³ 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".³⁴ John Wesley was undoubtedly familiar with

²⁹ Patricia Sotot-Heim, "La momie des Martres-d'Artière" in *Dossiers d'archéologie*, April 2000 (issue n° 252), 54.

³⁰ *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, 47-48.

³¹ 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.

³² See André de Winne, "John Wesley, l'abbé de Saint-Cyran et la perfection chrétienne : étude historique d'un emprunt textuel", (MDiv dissertation, *Institut protestant de théologie*, faculté of Montpellier, 2016-2017), *passim*.

³³ *The London Chronicle*, May 29- June 1, 1762 (issue n°848), 515. Riom is however correctly spelled in the 1762 article.

³⁴ *The London Chronicle*, May 29- June 1, 1762 (issue n°848), 515.

The London Chronicle, to which he wrote three letters in 1760-1761, and one in 1784.³⁵ 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(s) 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ In fact, in the 20th and 21st centuries, such an anecdote could be used as the starting point of a TV series or of 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

³⁵ See John Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 21, 277-280, 295-296 & 303-308 and vol. 22, 473.

³⁶ "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.

³⁷ 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, 2020). 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, 2020)).

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 I mentioned 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.

CONCLUSION

In December 1787, *The Arminian Magazine* presented an account of the strange discovery of a mummified teenager in the French province of Auvergne 31 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 to reach conclusions in this direction either.

In the last part of this article, I noted 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, we do not know much more about the mummy, presently stored in Paris, at the *Musée national d’histoire naturelle*.³⁸ Scientists can now say it probably dates from the end of the Gallo-Roman period (2nd-4th century AD)³⁹, especially since a very similar mummy was discovered in Naintré,

³⁸ <http://www.mnhn.fr/fr/collections/ensembles-collections/anthropologie-biologique/momies> (DOA: April 13, 2020).

³⁹ Patricia Sotot-Heim, “La momie des Martres-d’Artière”, 54 & 55.

in the Vienne department, in 1998 and this one could definitely be dated as belonging to the Gallo-Roman period⁴⁰. In addition to this, a similar leaden coffin containing a skeleton was discovered in Les Martres-d'Artière in 1862⁴¹, which gives substance to the area being somehow associated with burials in the Gallo-Roman period.

and that he was probably not a Christian because of the absence of any religious artefact.⁴² Finally, Buffon's assertion that the teenager was an important person seems to have been proved right since the techniques and the products were the same as those used by Egyptians in first-class embalmings⁴³.

In December 2017, manuscripts relating to the discovery and the examination of the body have come into the possession of Clermont-Ferrand's Bargoin Museum of Natural History:⁴⁴ it is hoped that these will help to discover more about this intriguing mummy which clearly has not yielded all of his secrets.

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, which could have allowed them to reflect on the link between faith and reason.

⁴⁰ Bui Thi Mai & 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 "Les derniers secrets de la momie des Martres-d'Artière dans le Puy-de-Dôme," *France Bleu Pays d'Auvergne* radio, 15 December 2017, <https://www.francebleu.fr/emissions/le-zoom-de-la-redaction/pays-d-auvergne/les-derniers-secrets-de-la-momie-des-martres-d-artiere-dans-le-puy-de-dome> (DOA: April 13, 2020). However, both Buffon and the Royal Academy of Sciences noted that such artefacts could have been stolen by one of the many people who had access to the body before it was (re)buried on Bishop de La Garlaye's order (*Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, 48 & Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*, 81).

⁴³ Patricia Sotot-Heim, "La momie des Martres-d'Artière", 54 & 55.

⁴⁴ "Momie des Martres-d'Artière : des manuscrits offerts au musée Bargoin pour percer le mystère."