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The Afterlife of Laurence Sterne (1713-68): Body Snatching, Dissection and the Role of Charles Collignon

Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the practice of body snatching from graves in the 1700s for the purpose of providing corpses for anatomical dissection, and for stocking anatomy museums. To do this we examine the exhumation and dissection of the famous eighteenth century novelist Laurence Sterne and explore the involvement of Charles Collignon, Professor of Anatomy at the University of Cambridge. We also show that osteological and cutmark analysis of a skull purported to be that of Sterne, currently housed in the Duckworth Collection at Cambridge, provides the key to solving the mystery surrounding why Sterne was resurrected.

Keywords: Grave robbing, Resurrection, Anatomical Preparation, Anatomy Museum, University of Cambridge

Introduction

In March 1768 the medical students of the University of Cambridge watched from the benches of the anatomical theatre at the Anatomy School on Queens' Lane as Charles Collignon, the Professor of Anatomy, prepared to give his regular lecture. A fresh subject had been acquired for the occasion and those present waited anxiously for Professor Collignon to begin the dissection. When Collignon entered the room it became immediately clear to him that the audience recognized the body.[1] Lying on the dissecting

table was Laurence Sterne, the well-known novelist of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.*[2]

The exhumation and dissection of the famous novelist Laurence Sterne (1713-68) has long served as an anecdote to support claims of resurrectionist activity supplying the dissecting rooms of the University of Cambridge.[3] Very little research has focused on the actual details of this event and many questions remain unanswered. Why was Sterne dug up from his grave and what happened afterwards? This paper explores the untold story about the acquisition, dissection and final resting place of Laurence Sterne. We also consider how the motivations of early anatomists can be explored with the aid of human skeletal remains.

Dissection at Cambridge

The University of Cambridge, founded in 1209, has a long history of medical education that can be traced back to 1284 with the founding of Peterhouse College by Hugh de Balsham, the Bishop of Ely.[4] However, it wasn't until the foundation of the Regius Professorship of Physic by Henry VIII in 1540 that medical education was really established in the form that we would recognise today. The first holder of this position, from 1540-1554, was John Blythe. He was required to read Hippocrates and Galen four days a week and to perform one 'anatomy', or dissection, each year if the students desired it.[5] This was the first sanctioned use of human dissection in England, and would later become a statutory requirement for students of medicine in 1547.

Anatomical training at Cambridge continued to evolve under the direction of John Caius in 1557 when he re-founded Gonville Hall, later renamed Gonville and Caius

College.[6] Before returning to Cambridge, Caius studied in Padua, where the tradition of dissection was well established. When he returned to England in 1544 he lectured on anatomy and became the first to demonstrate public dissections in England at the Barber Surgeons' Hall in London.[7] Caius, recognising the importance of human dissection to the study of anatomy, began giving practical anatomical instruction in Cambridge in 1557 and secured a Royal License in 1564, which allowed the Masters and Fellows to receive annually two bodies of executed criminals for dissection. Eventually these public displays were moved to the School of Physic and in 1562 the University started to provide practical anatomy demonstrations.[8]

The founding of the first Professorship of Anatomy in England in 1707 was a much-needed official sanction of the importance of anatomy to medical education.[9] Very little praise was bestowed upon the first five Professors of Anatomy, including Charles Collignon (1725–1785) who was the fifth to hold the position (1753-1785). Originally from France, Collignon was educated at Trinity College and received his MB in 1749 and MD in 1754. Historically he has been unjustly criticised as being an incompetent anatomist and a poor teacher.[10] Yet unlike some of his predecessors, Collignon gave a series of lectures and was known to dissect in public (if perhaps rather irregularly).[11]

Although believed to be largely unimportant to the development of medical education in Cambridge, this paper shows that he was responsible for developing the earliest anatomical preparations used for teaching at the University of Cambridge. Collignon is also believed to have been the dissector of Sterne, as he was the Professor of Anatomy at the time of Laurence Sterne's death and gave regular public lectures in

anatomy. This event, as reported below, challenges some of the previously published opinions of Collignon.

Acquisition: Was Sterne Selected?

Sterne died separated from his family at his lodgings at 41 Old Bond Street, London, on the 18th March. He was buried at the cemetery of the parish of St George's Hanover-Square in the Bayswater Road, London.[12] It was reported that only two mourners were present at his funeral, Thomas Becket and Sterne's lawyer, Samuel Salt.[13] Soon after his interment he was unceremoniously removed from his grave and sold to the Anatomy School in Cambridge, hereafter referred to as resurrection. The presence of Sterne's body at Cambridge leads to many questions on which we could only speculate. Foremost, why was the body taken so far from its original interment site? Could it be possible that the sitting Professor of Anatomy, Charles Collignon, had requested that it be brought to Cambridge?

Collignon was certainly aware of his cadavers' identity. Isaac Reed recorded in his personal diary on the October 12th 1787 a conversation he had about these events with Dr Richard Farmer, the Master of Emmanuel College.[14]

> "After breakfast went with the Master, Professor Harwood and Malone to see the Anatomy Schools. From thence to my room. Dined in the Hall. After Dinner packed up my Cloaths, etc, and concluded the day with the Family Dr. Harwood's invitation; Present: Dr. Farmer, Mr. Masters, Mr. Barnes, Mr. Wilcox, Mr. Malone, Dr. Harwood and myself. In the course of the Evening, Dr. Farmer said

that he was informed by Dr. Colignon, decd. that the body of Mr. Sterne had been sent down to Cambridge and was anatomised. It was from the burying ground beyond Tyburn where it was recognized by sevr. persons who knew him. I remember Becket the Bookseller once told me that he, and I think another, were the only persons who attended the Funeral. Mr. Stevenson Hall, the Author of Crazy Tales, was applied to but refused to attend or give himself the least concern about his deceased friend's body."

Although this passage does not expressly state that the body was specifically requested by Collignon, the statement clearly shows that Collignon knew where Sterne's body was originally buried. Collignon would have been unlikely to have such knowledge unless he was informed by the individuals who acquired the body, or he himself sent people to acquire the body. The passage also shows that not only did Collignon know Sterne's burial location, he had a mutual friend, Sir Isaac Reed, in common with one of the mourners present at Stern's funeral, Thomas Becket. Reed reports that Becket personally told him that he attended the funeral and as a guest he would have been privy to the burial location well before members of the population. Reed could have easily passed on the burial location to Collignon.

Furthermore, the passage indicates that rather than being secretive with the identity of his dissected victim, Collignon boasted about it to Dr. Farmer. Collignon even relayed the fact that the body was recognized by several members of the audience, a detail that was surely a potential source of embarrassment for Collignon and the University, being that Sterne's body was acquired illegally. The situation could have been

particularly embarrassing due to the fact that bodies for dissection at Cambridge could be acquired legally after the passing of the Murder Act in 1752.[15]

Given that the enterprise of procuring cadavers for dissection was quite lucrative, it is possible that Sterne's grave was targeted by chance. Pauper cemeteries were commonly targeted by grave robbers as described in the *Diary of a Resurrectionist 1811-1812*.[16] Resurrectionist gangs frequented pauper cemeteries including Bunhill Row, and The Green at St Giles Cripplegate.[17] The burial ground at St. George's Hanover Square was also isolated, making it an ideal location for a grave robber who did not want to be disturbed. However, if obtained by chance, it makes little sense that the body was dissected in Cambridge when there were a plethora of hospitals and private anatomical schools in London that would have gladly received it. In London by this time, the teaching hospitals of St. George's, Guy's, St Bartholomew's and the London Hospital all had established medical training programs, which included instruction in anatomy, each requiring bodies to supply medical students.[18] The private anatomy schools, run by John Hunter and William Hewson, were also known to purchase corpses for their students.[19] [20] The location of many of these institutions were within a reasonable distance of the burial grounds at St Paul's, St Giles in the Fields, and St George's Hanover Square. Any of these institutions would have been much more convenient to deliver a body, but his corpse was not taken to a London institution.

Another possible theory is that Sterne may have been part of a routine shipment of bodies from London to Cambridge. The trade network for cadavers from London to Cambridge has been well researched during the mid 1800s to 1920.[21] It is possible that the presence of Sterne's body in Cambridge is evidence that cadavers were being shipped

to Cambridge earlier than previously recorded. However, we feel it unlikely that corpses would have been routinely transported all the way from London to Cambridge in the 1760s, based on the limited number of cadavers needed at Cambridge during this time.

A final potential scenario is that Sterne's body may have been recognized by the resurrectionists themselves. This could have resulted in the sale of the body to an area outside of London where it would be less likely to be recognised. However, obtaining a body in London and transporting it to Cambridge to sell would have been expensive and would have increased the risk of the participants being caught. Even if they made the dangerous trip to Cambridge undetected, the resurrectionists ran an additional risk that Cambridge would refuse to buy the body and they would have nothing to show for their efforts. In the mid to late 1700s very few bodies were dissected at the University of Cambridge, as Collignon gave only semi-regular anatomy lectures, and the few medical students in attendance did not dissect cadavers themselves. These factors resulted in a low demand for cadavers in Cambridge compared to the hospitals or private anatomy schools in London, which were desperate for bodies to teach anatomy even if they were illegally acquired. However, it is quite clear that Stern's corpse did end up on the dissection table at Cambridge.

The Dissection: An Osteological Assessment

While several sources indicate that Sterne was indeed anatomised at the University of Cambridge, his final resting place is unclear from the published literature.[22, 23] A popular and commonly recorded belief is that upon recognising him, a conscientious student or faculty member stole back Sterne's body from the Anatomy Department in

Cambridge and returned it to its original resting place in St. George's.[24] Later, under the threat of redevelopment, the remains thought to be Sterne's were removed to the churchyard of St. Michael's, Coxwold with a monument marking his burial place.[25] However, a skull kept in the Anatomical Museum now residing in the Duckworth Collection in the Division of Biological Anthropology at the University of Cambridge seems to contradict this tale.

The skull of individual 612 (Figure 1) was discovered in a blue tin box, indicating it was from the collection of the former Anatomical Museum. When examined, the morphological characteristics of the skull indicated it was that of a robust adult male. Both nasal bones showed evidence of a malaligned but well healed fracture and a significant amount of ante-mortem tooth loss. The skull was identified as that of Laurence Sterne in the Duckworth collection catalogues.[26, 27] This identification was supported by the morphological characteristics and by the presence of his potential identity written on the frontal bone, including the name of the individual in whose collection individual 612 was located: Charles Collignon.

As far back as the 1890s, people have hunted through the Cambridge collections attempting to identify Stern's cranium. In 1891 Alexander Macalister (Professor of Anatomy 1883-1916) commented, 'I cannot identify any skull in the (Clark) collection as that of the author of Tristram Shandy'.[28] In this same passage Macalister expresses his belief that the skull of Sterne was in the collection at Cambridge as he muses about the fate of the mortal remains of the two great Irish satirists of that period. He states that, 'the skull of Swift…temporarily sojourned on the shelves of the museum in Dublin, and that of Sterne in the collection of Cambridge.'

Although it is not possible to be certain of identity based only upon the morphological characteristics of skeletal remains, this skull is compatible with the age and sex of Laurence Sterne. Bearing in mind the corresponding written records and the osteological assessment, the authors believe that there is a strong case for this skull (612) to be that of Laurence Sterne.

From what is known about the afterlife of Sterne, we might expect that the skull would show evidence of human dissection such as cutmarks from surgical instruments. There was however, no evidence of the skull being sawn open, a circumferential craniotomy, as was routine practice in human dissections during the mid 1750s. When a cranium was dissected at that time, the scalp was cut open with a knife and the soft tissues retracted away from the bone. The skull would then be opened by sawing around the top of the head and removing the top so the brain could be examined.[29] The skull of individual 612 has no evidence of this kind of internal examination being conducted.

There are, however, a number of cut-marks made by a knife, located on the exterior surface of the skull. On examination, these cut-marks were series of cuts made coronally, beginning on the left temporal bone and extending over the left parietal bone superiorly from the external auditory meatus. The coronally-oriented cuts are consistent with the way the scalp was removed before a circumferential craniotomy was historically performed; a knife was used to make an incision on the temporal bone, just above the external auditory meatus. The incision was then extended superiorly over the top and then extends inferiorly terminating just above the opposite ear. Once the scalp was cut, it would then be pulled down to reveal the bones of the skull.

Figure 1: Skull believed to be that of Laurence Sterne. Image by Jenna Dittmar

Several other short horizontally-oriented knife marks, consistent with retracting the scalp and severing the attaching muscles, were also found. These defleshing cuts were found at the site of insertion of the temporalis muscle on the temporal bones, on the frontal bone and on the occipital bone. Similar short knife marks were also found on the facial bones (Figure 2). This pattern of knife marks suggests that the soft tissue was removed from the outer surface of the cranial vault and the face. The locations of these short horizontal cuts are consistent with what has been found on other museum preparations found in the collection formerly on display in the Anatomical Museum.[30]

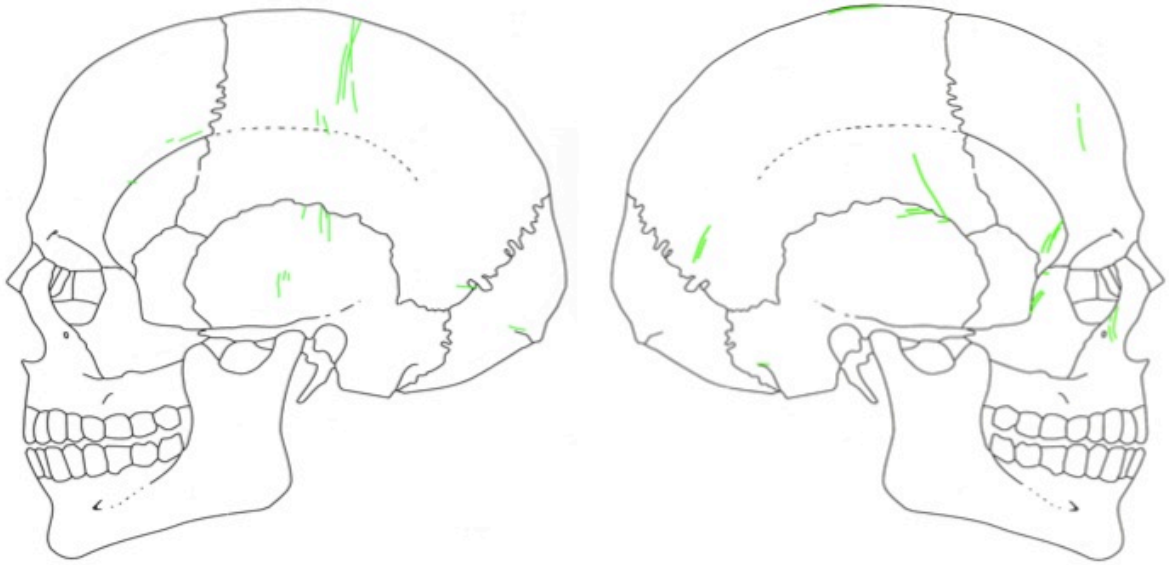

Figure 2: Knife mark placement on the skull believed to be that of Laurence Sterne

The lack of saw marks and presence of this type of cutmarks indicate that the flesh was removed from the skull after death and that the face was likely dissected, though great care was taken to keep the skull intact and undamaged. If the corpse had been dissected in a standard manner of the time, it would have at the very least undergone craniotomy. It does appear that Collignon chose to dissect this particular corpse in a less destructive manner, which enabled him to add the intact skull to his museum.

At Home in the Anatomical Collection

The difficulty in obtaining cadavers before the nineteenth century made maximising their utility necessary. This is highlighted by archaeological evidence of 'cadaver sharing', a method of dividing a single body between multiple students. This practice is known to have taken place in the large English urban hospitals.[31] [32] Although

the primary reason for obtaining these cadavers was often for dissection, once acquired, the cadavers often served multiple purposes for institutions. The bodies were valuable as dissection material and they also provided material to practice surgical procedures and occasionally to examine pathological processes. A further way of 'getting the most' out of a cadaver was to keep portions for future anatomical purposes in an anatomical museum.[33]

The primary functions of anatomical preparations were to demonstrate both normal and pathological features, or the physiology of an organ or organ system. In addition to these functions, William Hunter believed that preparations were particularly useful in demonstrating minute features that may be difficult for inexperienced students to dissect themselves:

> "Preparations serve two purposes chiefly, to wit, the preservation of uncommon things, and the preservation of such things as required considerable labour to anatomize them, so as to shew their structure distinctly. Of the first sort are, the pregnant uterus, diseases, parts of singular conformity, &c. Of the second class are, preparation of the ear, the eye, and in general, such as shew the very fine and delicate parts of the body, which we call the minutiae of Anatomy." [34]

Preserved human tissues have been used in anatomical teaching since at least the mid-seventeenth century and by the mid-eighteenth century the use of anatomical preparations was entrenched in medical education in Britain. Museums housing anatomical preparations are known to have existed in essentially every major public or private medical education institution in England by the late 1800s. The importance of

using preparations to teach anatomy was stressed by contemporary anatomists through literature and practice. Fredrick John Knox stated that 'Anatomy cannot be taught without a museum, and the more extensive the better, provided the lecturer himself is perfectly acquainted with the museum from which he purposes to draw his illustrations.' [35] This attitude towards anatomical collections was clearly shared by many surgeons and physicians including John Hunter, whose own collection consisted of over 13,000 human and animal preparations.[36]

Although necessary for teaching, preparations displaying normal anatomy and physiology were not as prized as those that showed unusual anatomical variation or pathological processes. This is evidenced by the effort and large sums of money anatomists expended to secure this type of preparation. John Hunter infamously used bribery in 1783 to procure the body of Charles Byrne, also known as the Irish Giant, and displayed his skeleton in his anatomical museum. It remains in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London among many other prized pathological preparations.[37]

Anatomical museums were not only required for teaching; they also elevated the status of the institution.[38] This made having an extensive museum containing interesting and famous material highly desirable to medical institutions. Although not always as informative or useful for teaching anatomy, the practice of acquiring famous or infamous individuals (or pieces of individuals) like Sterne for display purposes is well documented. The infamous murderer William Burke, who was convicted and hanged for his part in the murder of sixteen people in Edinburgh to sell their cadavers to the anatomical school of Alexander Monro *Primus,* was, in his turn, publically dissected. The skeleton was

retained and is still housed in the Edinburgh University Museum. The mortal remains of other contemporary celebrities can also be found in the Museum of James Macartney, originally from Trinity College Dublin, which allegedly housed the skeleton of a famous Frenchwoman named Madame du Barré, who was guillotined in Paris on December 7, 1793.[39] Although the skeleton is unlikely to be that of the famous Madame du Barré (Marie Jean Becu), the reported presence of her skeleton in the museum still attracted and entertained visitors and increased the reputation of Macartney's Museum.

At the University of Cambridge, Collignon was the first to amass an anatomical collection that would later be built upon by his successors, eventually becoming the Anatomical Museum in Cambridge. The skull of Laurence Sterne is the oldest known preparation in the Cambridge Anatomical Museum of a notable individual and its presence added significant value to the collection. The retention of Sterne's identity once he was on display in the museum, and even long after the museum was disassembled, further enhances the argument of the value Collignon placed on the remains of Sterne. This shows that not only did Collignon aspire to build a valuable collection that would increase his reputation, but also the reputation of the University of Cambridge. Collignon's calculated attempt to create a valuable anatomical collection at Cambridge by procuring the skull of Sterne and its careful dissection shows that Collignon was more similar to his other collecting contemporaries, like John and William Hunter, than previously acknowledged.

Conclusion

The osteological analysis of the skull of individual 612 from the Anatomical Museum at the University of Cambridge has given previously unknown information about the afterlife of Laurence Sterne, including details of his dissection and his final resting place. There is quite plausible historical and osteological evidence to support the theory that the skull in question is that of Laurence Sterne. Additional support for this theory could potentially be acquired in the future through aDNA analysis or forensic facial reconstruction.

We may never know for sure to what extent Collignon was involved with acquiring Sterne for dissection, but we have shown that he did know the location of Sterne's final interment. As very few bodies were dissected in the mid to late 1700s at the University of Cambridge, it is unlikely that grave robbers would trouble themselves in transporting a body all the way from London unless they were specifically instructed to do so, especially since the hospitals and private anatomy schools in London were more desperate for cadavers to teach anatomy. This makes it unlikely that Sterne would have been collected at random and brought to Cambridge, but rather than he was brought there in response to a specific request for his body.

The examination of the reasons behind the acquisition and dissection of Sterne have illuminated how the fate of Sterne's mortal remains was determined by Charles Collignon. The locations of the cutmarks on Sterne's skull indicate that it was specifically chosen for display, initially in Collignon's private collection and then later in the Anatomical Museum at the University of Cambridge. The remains of the famous Laurence Sterne were the first of a prominent individual in the collection of Charles Collignon, and later the Cambridge Museum. His presence would have added significant

prestige value to the collection and it is likely for this reason that his skull was undamaged when he was dissected. Furthermore, the presence of Sterne's skull in the former collection of the Anatomical Museum settles the controversy over the final resting place of at least a part of Laurence Sterne and also the motivations behind why he was dissected.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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