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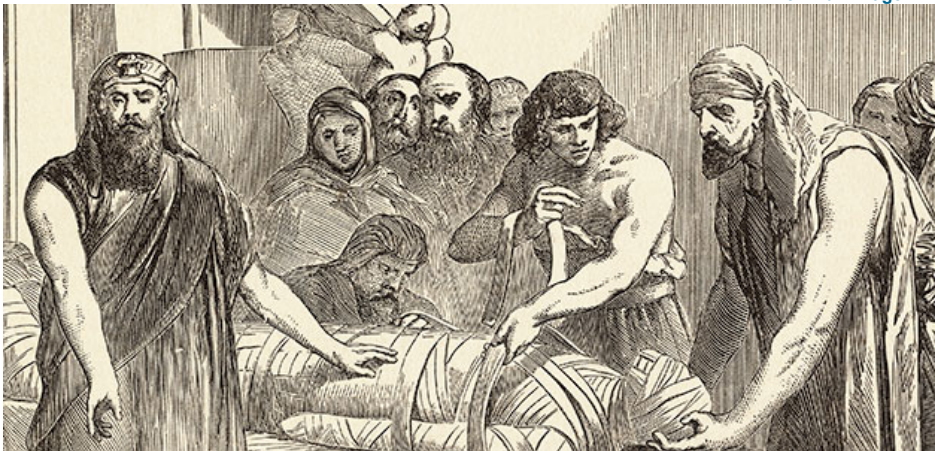
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HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY

The Gruesome History of Eating Corpses as Medicine

The question was not “Should you eat human flesh?” says one historian, but, “What sort of flesh should you eat?”

By Maria Dolan

Smithsonian.com, May 07, 2012, [Subscribe](#)[View Full Image »](#)

Egyptians embalming a corpse. (Bettmann / Corbis)

The last line of a 17th century poem by John Donne prompted Louise Noble's quest. “Women,” the line read, are not only “Sweetness and wit,” but “mummy, possessed.”

Sweetness and wit, sure. But mummy? In her search for an explanation, Noble, a lecturer of English at the University of New England in Australia, made a surprising discovery: That word recurs throughout the literature of early modern Europe, from Donne's “Love's Alchemy” to Shakespeare's “Othello” and Edmund Spenser's “The Faerie Queene,” because mummies and other preserved and fresh human remains were a common ingredient in the medicine of that time. In short: Not long ago, Europeans were cannibals.

Noble's new book, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, and another by Richard Sugg of England's University of Durham, *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires: The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians*, reveal that for several hundred years, peaking in the 16th and 17th centuries, many Europeans,

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by Louise Noble

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including royalty, priests and scientists, routinely ingested remedies containing human bones, blood and fat as medicine for everything from headaches to epilepsy. There were few vocal opponents of the practice, even though cannibalism in the newly explored Americas was reviled as a mark of savagery. Mummies were stolen from Egyptian tombs, and skulls were taken from Irish burial sites. Gravediggers robbed and sold body parts.

“The question was not, ‘Should you eat human flesh?’ but, ‘What sort of flesh should you eat?’” says Sugg. The answer, at first, was Egyptian mummy, which was crumbled into tinctures to stanch internal bleeding. But other parts of the body soon followed. Skull was one common ingredient, taken in powdered form to cure head ailments. Thomas Willis, a 17th-century pioneer of brain science, brewed a drink for apoplexy, or bleeding, that mingled powdered human skull and chocolate. And King Charles II of England sipped “The King’s Drops,” his personal tincture, containing human skull in alcohol. Even the toupee of moss that grew over a buried skull, called *Usnea*, became a prized additive, its powder believed to cure nosebleeds and possibly epilepsy. Human fat was used to treat the outside of the body. German doctors, for instance, prescribed bandages soaked in it for wounds, and rubbing fat into the skin was considered a remedy for gout.

Blood was procured as fresh as possible, while it was still thought to contain the vitality of the body. This requirement made it challenging to acquire. The 16th century German-Swiss physician Paracelsus believed blood was good for drinking, and one of his followers even suggested taking blood from a living body. While that doesn't seem to have been common practice, the poor, who couldn't always afford the processed compounds sold in apothecaries, could gain the benefits of cannibal medicine by standing by at executions, paying a small amount for a cup of the still-warm blood of the condemned. "The executioner was considered a big healer in Germanic countries," says Sugg. "He was a social leper with almost magical powers." For those who preferred their blood cooked, a 1679 recipe from a Franciscan apothecary describes how to make it into marmalade.

Rub fat on an ache, and it might ease your pain. Push powdered moss up your nose, and your nosebleed will stop. If you can afford the King's Drops, the float of alcohol probably helps you forget you're depressed—at least temporarily. In other words, these medicines may have been incidentally helpful—even though they worked by magical thinking, one more clumsy search for answers to the question of how to treat ailments at a time when even the circulation of blood was not yet understood.

However, consuming human remains fit with the leading medical theories of the day. “It emerged from homeopathic ideas,” says Noble. “It’s ‘like cures like.’ So you eat ground-up skull for pains in the head.” Or drink blood for diseases of the blood.

Another reason human remains were considered potent was because they were thought to contain the spirit of the body from which they were taken. “Spirit” was considered a very real part of physiology, linking the body and the soul. In this context, blood was especially powerful. “They thought the blood carried the soul, and did so in the form of vaporous spirits,” says Sugg. The freshest blood was considered the most robust. Sometimes the blood of young men was preferred, sometimes, that of virginal young women. By ingesting corpse materials, one gains the strength of the person consumed. Noble quotes Leonardo da Vinci on the matter: “We preserve our life with the death of

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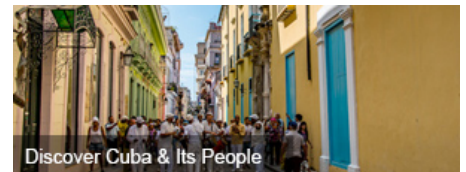
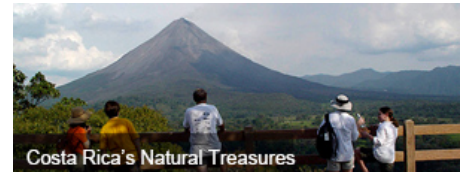
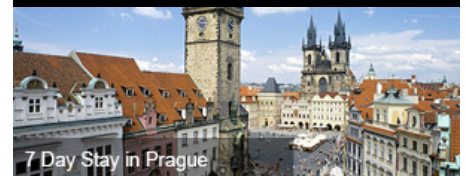
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others. In a dead thing insensate life remains which, when it is reunited with the stomachs of the living, regains sensitive and intellectual life.”

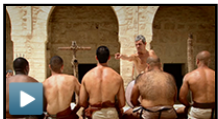
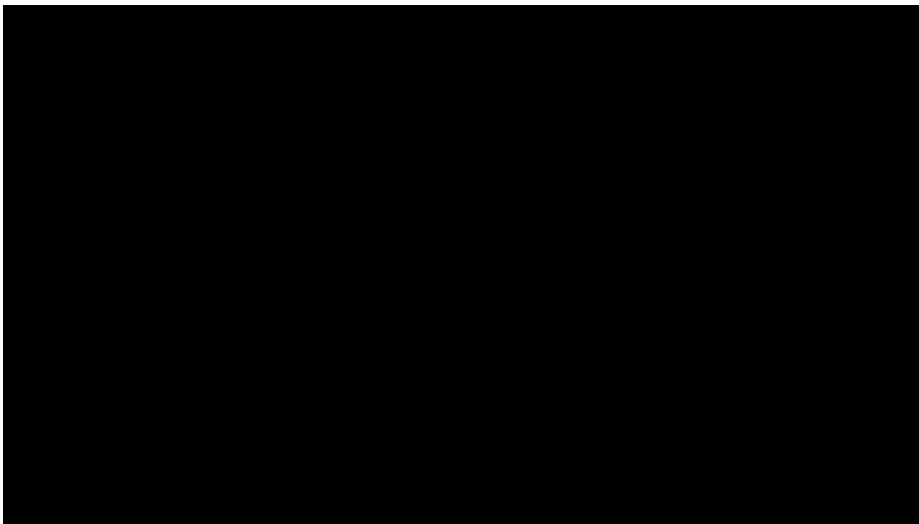
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An addition to your comment Ed.I consider myself a neutral party in this because I'm not opinionated in this topic but for one of the points raised in Eds comments. You see, people have become very tender and shy and sensitive when it comes to racism. What is absolutely ludicrous about modern European culture (by which i mainly reffer to and also include, England, Australia and America)is that the line between racism and justice/what is fair and right/ being honest/speaking up/having an opion, or whatever you want to call it ('a rose by any other name...') has simply become TOO BLURRED! Peoples hesitation to do something about an injustice (for want of a better word) committed by someone from a different culture or skin colour against someone who is "white" for fear of being accused of racism is wrong! In this way i feel the law is unequal. But having said that, the problem is not with the law: it is with a deep rooted social veiwi and cannot be fixed easily. I also hope that no one thinks me a racist as i myself am sensitive with this topic.

Posted by Maeve on September 17,2013 | 05:44 AM

It's interesting that we can feel confronted by corpse eating for medicine when we thoroughly enjoy corpse eating for the taste.

Posted by Maxwell on October 15,2012 | 08:33 AM

I'll pretend I ain't read that

Posted by Eragon Shadeslayer on October 6,2012 | 06:21 PM

Nummy num nums

Posted by zed - in his big flying head on July 24,2012 | 03:13 PM

Horace, pardon me but I do believe this article is about the Europeans not being exempt from partaking in cannibalism. I didn't think it was political at all, I think that one was in the interpreter. The comment about the eater and the eaten is very true. If you've ever done any research on the subject you will find that many cultures who chose to eat human flesh did so for spiritual reasons. They truly believed they were consuming the spirit, the power, the energy of the previously existing human life. It is still practiced in some tribes as a matter of fact. Don't look for conflict, look to dissolve it.

Posted by Danielle on May 25,2012 | 11:43 AM

Mr. Powell's criticism is apt. We can also note that the cannibalism criticized by Europeans involved killing the eaten person, often in horrific rituals that elevated cruelty to art. European medicinal cannibalism, while callous to the dead, involved a corpse that wasn't killed to be eaten. There's a great difference between what we now consider disrespect for the dead and murder. While non-European cannibalism was also, at times, done with the already dead, to characterize their cannibalism as "social" reeks of the condescension that runs through multiculturalism. Something horrific when practiced by a Jeffrey Dahmer is just a wonderful bit of diversity when practiced by someone in a loincloth and placed in a religious context. This would be a quaint peculiarity of academia but for the fact that it helps justify and excuse the cannibalism being practiced today by non-Westerners. The albinos being killed in Africa for magical purposes aren't the only victims. Non-albino children are being killed to magically gain wealth and health. This is even being done in countries where the populace should know better. In Britain, young children have been killed for similar purposes by non-European immigrants. The police, fearful of being called racist, didn't investigate till the body count got too high to ignore. Just because a murderous practice is accepted by the members of a non-European culture doesn't elevate it to an acceptable "social" custom and guilt about our great grandparents' "social" custom of dismissing other cultures as inferior doesn't justify sugarcoating grotesque customs to compensate.

Posted by Ed on May 24,2012 | 11:17 AM

I have heard that human placentas is a commonplace ingredient in cosmetics today? When I first read Horace's comment, I was like 'oh please'. But Horace got me thinking. When I worked as a chemist in a hospital, I heard that the hospital sold human placentas to corporations for use as an ingredient in cosmetics. I saw little clear plastic bags of them going out on a skid into a truck. If it's true, then not just in Europe, but just about everywhere, women are smearing cosmetics, that contain human placenta, on their faces, today. I did just now find this article on time.com ... <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000192,00.html> Talk about gruesome.

Posted by Wilson on May 17,2012 | 11:14 PM

It's still going on today. There was a recent article (not in the tabloids) relating the South Korean customs officials found smuggled energy pill made of children. Guess where they came from.

Posted by Rob on May 17,2012 | 06:21 PM

Embryos are not humans.

Posted by Sam on May 17,2012 | 01:47 PM

This article seems to be a hatchet job against Europeans, and seems to be more "anti-racist" racist drivel, as can be gleaned from the quote: "The one thing that we know is that almost all non-Western cannibal practice is deeply social in the sense that the relationship between the eater and the one who is eaten matters," says Conklin. "In the European process, this was largely erased and made irrelevant. Human beings were reduced to simple biological matter equivalent to any other kind of commodity medicine." When Europeans eat you, it is presumed, it is impersonal and cruel. When non-Europeans eat you, it is "deeply social", as if that matters to the one consumed.. baffling. Though this article makes passing and apologetic references to cannibalism outside of Europe (notably India), it makes no mention of the ritualized cannibalism in Nigerian black magic (for instance), or the current and ongoing killing and dismemberment of albinos in Tanzania for the procuring of fetishes.. Maybe they can be forgiven because, it as the author believes, "social". Lastly, human body parts are still used today, either as stem cells, or as treatment for pituitary disorders, where freeze-dried human pituitary glands are used. This article is too political for my taste, though mildly interesting..

Posted by Horace Powell on May 16,2012 | 12:53 AM

Thanks, Steve, for pointing out the staunch/stanch error in the story. (And congratulations on being the first to point it out!) We've fixed that mistake. Matthew Unger, the books listed under Related Books are filled with details on this topic. Beth A. Conklin, quoted in the story, has written a book called Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society, which addresses a different topic, funerary cannibalism.

Posted by Maria Dolan on May 15,2012 | 06:53 PM

>The answer, at first, was Egyptian mummy, which was crumbled into tinctures to staunch internal bleeding. I think you mean "stanch."

Posted by Steve on May 14,2012 | 10:15 PM

Makes me wonder what kinds of completely idiotic and harmful behaviors seem reasonable to us, today? Because people surely haven't gotten any smarter. Perhaps exposure to chemicals and engineered foods will be close to the top of the list?

Posted by Wilson on May 14,2012 | 09:42 PM

I'm surprised that the consumption of human brain disease didn't lead to widespread outbreaks of Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease and other forms of spongiform encephalitis. In short, ewwww.

Posted by Julieann Wozniak on May 13,2012 | 06:52 PM

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