

Was Napoleon poisoned with Arsenic?

After Napoleons' defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Emperor was sent into exile on the tiny island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic Ocean. He spent five years in exile and died on May 5th 1821. During his exile his health declined rapidly.

From 1819 to 1821 Napoleon was under the care of Dr. Antommarchi. After Napoleon's death he performed the autopsy which was supervised by five British doctors. He confirmed that Napoleon had died of stomach cancer but many people did not accept that official post mortem report as fact. They suspected that Bonaparte was poisoned with arsenic.

While on St. Helena, Napoleon was first treated by Dr. O'Meara. In 1817 he had written a report which stated that Napoleon's gums were full of holes, he was suffering from insomnia, swollen legs, attacks of migraine and hot flashes. In his view Napoleon was suffering possibly from scurvy because of unbalanced diet.

Modern investigator, Rene Maury described the symptoms of arsenic poisoning, which was unknown until 19th century. Forensic scientists dismissed this report. Maury put forward a second argument which pointed out that when the rulers' body was returned to France in 1840 the corpse inside the coffin was not decomposed. This was due to the fact that arsenic was introduced to his body. Other theories include the climatic condition of St. Helena which may have slowed the process of decomposition or the fact that his coffin was placed in a group of three other coffins which may kept the body in an air tight condition.

If he was murdered this means who was the murderer? Possible suspects included an agent of the Bourbons, the French royal family who were restored to the throne in 1814 and owed their positions in power to Napoleons defeat. Another view was also pointed at the British doctors who certainly wished to get rid of him. Maury however claimed to have discovered the real suspect in the Count de Mantholen who was responsible for the household of the exiled emperor. One of his tasks was to procure wine from South Africa. Hence he could easily have added the poison. There is a strong motive behind this theory. According to the emperors final Will the Count de Mantholen stood to receive a large sum of money after the death of Napoleon...

In 1960 and then again in 1994, tests were conducted on Napoleon's remains and the tests revealed traces of arsenic in Napoleon's body. The poison could have come from the food or water of St. Helena.

Dr. Antommarchi also diagnosed an enlargement and inflammation liver as well as diagnosed tuberculosis in his lungs.

Napoleon poisoned with arsenic during St. Helena exile, toxicologist says

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By ANABELLE NICOUD

The Associated Press

PARIS — New scientific evidence supports the theory that Napoleon Bonaparte was poisoned with arsenic during his second exile, a French toxicologist said yesterday.

Pascal Kintz said he found traces of the poison in two strands of the French emperor's hair, supporting the conclusions of past tests.

Napoleon died May 5, 1821, on the island of St. Helena, where he had been banished after his defeat at Waterloo. He was 51. The official cause of death is stomach cancer.

Kintz did the tests at the request of the head of the International Napoleonic Society, Ben Weider.

Weider claims Napoleon died of arsenic, arguing the British and French wanted to ensure he would not make a second comeback, as he had done after his exile on the island of Elba.

Conspiracy theories took on new seriousness a decade ago after the FBI and Britain's Scotland Yard discovered that clippings of Napoleon's hair were tinged with poison.

Kintz and colleagues said they previously examined and dismissed the possibility that the traces of poison could have come from other sources such as seafood. "I'm simply saying that the arsenic found in his hair is mineral — thus, there was poisoning," Kintz said yesterday.

The strands Kintz studied were purchased at a Paris auction 30 years ago. In other tests, Napoleon's hair samples came from a number of sources to ensure accuracy. Weider hopes to gain access to Napoleon's body, buried in the gilded Invalides monument in Paris.

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Poison: What Killed Napoleon?

Was Napoleon Bonaparte poisoned? This question has plagued historians since the defeated French emperor's death on May 5, 1821, on the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic, where he lived in exile for nearly six years. Since then, the debate has raged about the cause of Napoleon's death.



Napoleon himself fueled suspicion, writing in his will a mere three weeks before his demise at age 51, “If I die before my time, (I was) murdered by the English oligarchy and its assassin.” Chief among the theories for the exiled emperor’s death is arsenic poisoning—an idea reinforced by the remarkable condition of his body when it was exhumed in 1840 for reburial in Paris. Because it is also toxic to microorganisms, arsenic slows down the decomposition of human tissue, a phenomenon described as “arsenic mummification.” Subsequent 20th-century tests of preserved locks of Napoleon’s hair tested positive for arsenic.

But even if arsenic was the cause of death—which has not been proven with certainty—Napoleon’s charge of foul play may not be justified. A less dramatic but nonetheless plausible alternative is that Napoleon could have been exposed to the poison through the toxic fumes given off by wallpaper at Longwood, his prison home.

A sample had been secured by a visitor to the site in the 1820s and tucked into a family scrapbook. It surfaced in Norfolk, England, in the 1980s and, when tested by British scientists in the 1990s, was found to contain arsenic. The discovery was not entirely surprising given that arsenic-based pigments were widely used to create brilliant greens in the 19th century.

In a hot and damp room, the wallpaper would give off arsenical vapors—enough to account for what was found in his hair, though perhaps not enough to kill him.

Other evidence suggests that Napoleon’s exposure to arsenic was likely life-long. In 2008, an Italian team widened the inquiry by testing not only strands of Napoleon’s hair from four points in his life—including his boyhood, his exile, the day of his death, and the day after—but that of his son, Napoleon II, and his wife, Empress Josephine. All samples were found to have similarly high arsenic levels, roughly 100 times that of living people whose hair was included in the analysis for comparison. The team from Italy’s National Institute of Nuclear Physics concluded that the results suggest “chronic exposure...simply attributed to environmental factors, unfortunately no longer easily identifiable, or habits involving food and therapeutics.”

Arsenic was a common ingredient in a number of household products in the 19th century, according to *The Poisoner’s Handbook*, Deborah Blum’s compelling history of forensic medicine.

Besides containing arsenic to deter rats, wallpaper was also hung with arsenic-laced paste. The same arsenic-based pigments used in wallpaper also were used to color fabrics, artificial plants, candles, paper products, soap, and more. Arsenic was used in weed killers, fly paper, and as rat poison. In what were thought to be safe doses, arsenic was used in popular medicinal tonics like Dr. Fowler’s Solution, an arsenic-based cure-all for any number of ailments that was sold into the 1950s; “complexion wafers,” ingested to remove blemishes and produce translucent skin.

As an instrument of murder, arsenic had advantages. Mixed in food or drink, it was difficult to taste. Especially administered over time in steady doses, the outward effects of arsenic poisoning—nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, convulsions, confusion, difficulty breathing, abdominal pain—mimic natural diseases, like influenza, cholera, or just an ulcer. Arsenic’s ubiquity into the 20th century meant that its presence in a cadaver was not necessarily considered proof of foul play.

Still, as forensic techniques improved over time, arsenic’s tendency to spread throughout the body eventually offered pathologists the edge. “A poison like arsenic, which hits some fundamental cellular process like the production of energy from sugars or other substances, affects everything,” says Mark Siddall, curator in the Division of Invertebrate Zoology who curated *The Power of Poison*. “This allows us to go back in time, because you can detect arsenic in hair samples that have been sitting around for a couple hundred years.”

In Napoleon’s case, arsenic was likely just one of many compounds taxing an already troubled system. In the course of treatments for a variety of symptoms—swollen legs, abdominal pain, jaundice, vomiting, weakness—Napoleon was subjected to a smorgasbord of other toxic substances. He was said to consume large amounts of a sweet apricot-based drink containing hydrocyanic acid. Two days before his death, his British doctors gave him a dose of calomel after which he collapsed into a stupor and never recovered. An autopsy carried out the next day revealed ulcerating stomach cancer.

In what is perhaps the most convincing hypothesis, published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* in 2004, an international team of toxicologists and pathologists concluded that Napoleon’s death was a case of “medical misadventure,” and that the various drugs he was administered combined with the arsenic and a weak state of health to create a fatal imbalance and cardiac arrest. They added, “If the arsenic poisoning was intentional, it would still be homicide.”

And so the mystery continues.