

Identification of human remains by teeth - the previously undiscovered case of William II Villehardouin

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Abstract

Forensic Dentistry helps to identify living or dead persons by their teeth. There are early records of cases in which teeth played such an important role (Popea, Charles the Bold, etc). The aim of this article is to draw attention to yet another generally unknown primitive application of Forensic Dentistry in a battle that changed history. The battle of Pelagonia took place in September of 1259 A.D. It was between the Empire of Nicaea (Iznik) and the Despotate of Epirus, Kingdom of Sicily and the Principality of Achaia. The Empire of Nicaea was victorious. Many knights were killed; others fled or were taken captive. William II Villehardouin, Prince of Achaia, fled and was later found under a haystack near the city of Kastoria. He was recognised due to his large, protruding anterior teeth that differentiated him from the other Frenchmen taken captive. This battle was the beginning of the end for the Principality of Achaia, the strongest French State in Greece with important political and cultural consequences.

Keywords: Forensic Dentistry; Dental Identification; William II Villehardouin

Introduction

Forensic Dentistry is the scientific part of the framework formed by the medicolegal investigation into a person's death, conducted by a forensic pathologist, and entails: identifying unknown decedents by the teeth, jaws, and craniofacial bones, bite-mark analysis, analysis of oro-facial trauma associated with person abuse and dental jurisprudence, including expert witness testimony. This science, a branch of general dentistry is used frequently in modern times for bite mark analysis and comparison. The use of human teeth as a means of body/skeletal identification dates back to the early Greek and Roman times. The aim of this article is to highlight another generally unknown primitive application of Forensic Dentistry in identifying a key participant in a battle that changed history.

The battle of Pelagonia (Sept. 1259 A.D.) - The dental identification of William II Villehardouin

The battle of Pelagonia took place in September of 1259 A.D. The warring parties were the Empire of Nicaea (Iznik) and the “Despotate” of Epirus, Kingdom of Sicily and the Principality of Achaea. William II Villehardouin was the Prince of Achaea, the strongest Latin state in the former Byzantine Empire-Romania. He was son in law to Michael II of Epirus (2, 3).

In 1259 the army of the Nicaean Empire (Iznik) invaded Thessaly. The official Emperor in Nicaea was John VI Lascaris, but the regent and true Emperor was Michael VIII Paleologos (Figure 1 and 2). The Nicaeans were led by John Paleologos, brother of Michael VIII and the Sebastokrator Theodore Dukas, brother of Michael II of Epirus. Alexios Stratigopoulos who bore the title of Megas Domestikos was also present. The Nicaean army consisted of Greek-Byzantines, 300 Germans, Turks, 2.000 Cumans, 13.000 Hungarians and 4.000 Serbs. There were supposedly 27 cavalry divisions, although all of these numbers are probably exaggerated. Theodore also gathered all the local peasants and their flocks and placed them on the hilltops, so that from far away they might appear to be part of the army (4).

The Epirote Army consisted of French/ Latin knights from the principality of Achaea led by William II Villehardouin, 400 German knights sent by Manfred - king of Sicily, the Byzantines of the Despotate of Epirus led by Michael II and his son Nikiphorus and the Vlachs of John Dukas, the illegitimate son of Michael II. Sources indicate that there were 8.000 cavalry men/knights and 12.000 infantry men (5).

In the beginning there was no direct conflict between the two armies, rather it resembled a guerrilla war. The Nicaeans were somewhat insecure in their power. The Nicaean Army retreated to the north near the city of Kastoria in the Valley of Pelagonia. Pelagonia is an area close to the city of Bitola (Monastir) in current day Republic of Macedonia, but there is a belief that the battle took place near the Greek city of Ptolemaida.

Theodore then sent a false deserter to Michael II and William, exaggerating the number of Nicaean troops and chastising Michael for attempting to attack a family member. The duke of Carinthia, did not believe the deserter, and convinced the Achaeans to stay when they decided to flee. Still, Michael and his troops deserted during the night. Other soldiers together with John Dukas fled to the Nicaean side; according to the author of the Byzantine Chronicle, George Pachymeres, John’s wife was a Vlach princess and she was insulted by certain French knights. When John complained to William, he called him a bastard and didn’t pay any attention to his complaints.

The next day the Germans and the French found themselves deserted by their allies in a hostile Greek land. William thought of fleeing but the baron of Karytaina, Godefroid de Bruyere, persuaded him to stay saying that their army was more homogenous than that of their enemy. The Germans led by the Duke of Carinthia attacked their fellow German mercenaries who were fighting on the Nicaean side. The duke was killed in battle. The Hungarian archers then killed all the Achaean horses, leaving the knights effectively defenceless. The Achaean foot soldiers fled and the knights surrendered. Acropolites says that the German knights were captured by an embarrassingly small number of people – four (6). One of them was Megas Domestikos Alexios Stratigopoulos and the other Nikiforos Rimpsas (7). William II Villehardouin, Prince of Achaia, fled and was later found under a haystack near

the city of Kastoria. According to the Byzantine chronicler George Acropolites he was recognised due to his sizeable protruding anterior teeth that differentiated him from the other Frenchmen (6). Theodore brought him to John Palaiologos, brother of Michael VIII, who was in command of the expedition. William was taken captive, and in order to be released after some years, he had to return three important castles of Peloponnesus, including Mystras, to the Byzantines.

Indiscrepancy arises in the Chronicle of Morea: there is a claim that the "duke of Carinthia" was present at the battle. However, the duke at the time was Ulrich III, but he ruled many years after 1259, and was probably present at the battle. The author of the Chronicle may have invented a fictitious duke as a counterbalance to William. The battle is recorded in French/ Latin sources such as the Chronicle of Morea and also in Greek sources written by George Pachymeres, George Acropolites, Nicephorus Gregoras and George Sphrantzes (8). This was an important battle. The Principality of Achaea was reduced to Nicaean vassalage, never again to recover to its former glory. Michael VIII took advantage of the defeat in order to recapture Constantinople in 1261 with important political, historical and cultural consequences.

Discussion

From the beginning of history dental characteristics have been used for the identification of living or deceased persons. The first evidence of dental findings being used for forensic purposes is associated with Roman Emperor Nero (45-70 A.D.). The actual events in this case are not certain but at least one of the following probably occurred: 1) Nero's mother Agrippina had her husband's (Emperor Claudius) mistress Lollia killed and the head brought to her so that she could identify it as Lollia's by the discoloured tooth or malocclusion; 2) Nero's mistress Sabina had Nero kill his mother, of which she was made certain upon recognizing two maxillary canine teeth; 3) Sabina had Nero kill his first wife and identified her either by a discoloured tooth or malocclusion.(9).

In folk tale it was mentioned that William I (who had an unusual form of malocclusion) used his teeth to mark the wax on the official seal of England (1066 A.D.).

The first formally reported case of dental identification was that of the eighty-year-old warrior John Talbot, who fell in the battle of Castillon. In 1453 A.D. the body of John Talbot, English general and Count of Shrewsbury was identified due to a gap tooth extracted close to the time of his demise (1, 9). The identification of William II Villerhadouin (1259 A.D.) by his teeth could be added to the list of previously mentioned early landmark cases in forensic dentistry.

Conclusion

The simple identification of Prince William II Villehardouin by his teeth is represents of the primitive applications of forensic dentistry that paved the way to the modern science of forensic dentistry.



Figure 1 Michael VIII Paleologos, Emperor of the East Roman/Byzantine Empire.
(Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek).



Figure 2 Coin of William II Villehardouin with the inscription «+G. PRINCE Ach., + CLARENTIA» minted at Glarentza in Peloponnesus

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