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An aortic calcification in a seventeenth-century autopsy report: The case of Cardinal Camillo Melzi

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To the Editor,

We read with great interest the paper by Gaeta et al., who identified a case of severe atherosclerosis in a seventeenth-century Italian natural mummy [1]. In their conclusions, the authors stated, "*this case confirms that atherosclerosis is also a disease of ancient times. The presence of*

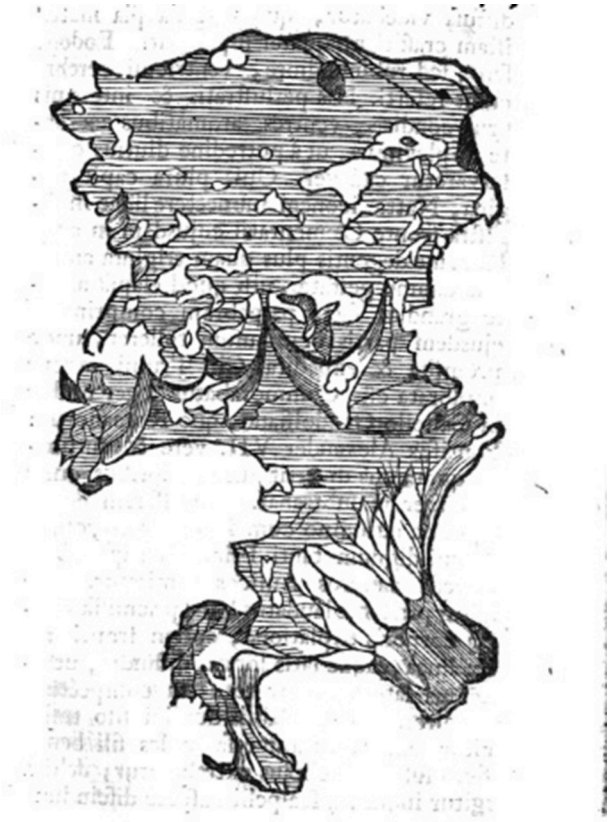

Fig. 1. Calcifications of the aorta of Cardinal Camillo Melzi, as represented in the text by Thomas Bartholin. Woodcut, *Epistolarum medicinalium*, *Centuria II*, 1663.

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atherosclerosis in pre-contemporary individuals could suggest that the disease may not only be uniquely characteristic of a specific diet or lifestyle, but it could be also an inherent component of human ageing" [1]. The aortic calcification in the mummy of Girolamo Macchi (1648–1734) reminds us a coeval case reported by the Danish physician Thomas Bartholin (1616–1680) in a famous collection of medical letters, entitled "Epistolarum medicinalium" (1663). In detail, Bartholin published a letter (*Epistula XCVII, Centuria II*) sent to him by a countryman, the surgeon Henrik van Møinichen (1631–1709), who described the results of the necroscopy of Cardinal Camillo Melzi (1590–1659), archbishop of Capua [2]. Van Møinichen performed the autopsy together with Giovanni Trullio (1598–1661), surgeon at the Hospital of Santo Spirito and Professor of Surgery at the University La Sapienza in Rome. At that time, Trullio was known for his ability in dissecting and embalming corpses and, for this reason, he performed autopsies of many noble and religious men of Rome, including Pope Urban VIII [3].

In the aorta of the cardinal, they found several calcifications ("*plurima ossis rudimenta*"), scattered about here and there through the artery, to a distance of three fingers from heart ("*sparsa erant haec frustula ossea hinc inde per arteriam ad distantiam trium a corde digitorum*") [2]. Van Møinichen also sent to Bartholin a woodcut of the calcified aorta (Fig. 1) that Bartholin published into the text [2]. This image is probably one of the most ancient representations of vascular atherosclerosis, as also postulated by the Italian historian of medicine Luigi Belloni (1914–1987) [4].

The description and representation of atherosclerosis of the aorta of Cardinal Melzi confirm the diffusion of this condition in the upper class during the seventeenth century. Like Girolamo Macchi, Camillo Melzi had a "privileged diet regimen", even if we are not able to conduct a paleo-nutritional study on his remains. Similarly, atherosclerosis of the aorta seemed not to be the cause of death of the cardinal [2].

In conclusion, the aortic calcification of Cardinal Camillo Melzi evidenced the importance of the analysis of autopsy reports of the seventeenth century, as well as medical correspondence between academic physicians [3,5,6]. These documents could provide us with important information on the diffusion of diseases in that period that could be integrated with the paleopathological findings derived from the study of human remains (skeletons and mummies).

Conflict of interest

The authors declared they do not have anything to disclose regarding conflict of interest with respect to this manuscript.

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