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A possible case of exogenous ochronosis in the examination of a mummified human head of the Medical and Forensic Anthropology Museum of the Complutense University of Madrid

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Oral Communication

ABSTRACT Introduction: A great collection of ancient human remains is actually on display in the Museo de Antropología Médica y Forense, Paleopatología y Criminalística. Among them, there is a mummified piece which had been described as the beheaded head of a Guinean Negress woman whose aspect looks so similar to leather. Reasonable doubts concerning this taxonomy arose; in consequence, a multidisciplinary study was carried out so it has been possible not only to ascertain a provenance and a date but to formulate a reasonable hypothesis for the diagnosis of the possible pathology present in this exemplary. Materials and methods: This head was anthropologically studied and presented a further scientific interest. Its macroscopic examination revealed tiny nodules on its face and the back of the neck. A first evaluation by the Forensic Anthropology Team indicated a possible skin inflammation due to a probable cosmetics use. Samples were extracted and sent to Athens for further histological and immunohistochemical examination. Electron Microscopy was also performed. Results: Obtained data permitted to return its provenance to Egypt and assign a date in the first half of the XVIIIth Dynasty. The primary results showed a chronic skin inflammation, while immunohistochemistry confirmed it. Comparison of the results and "similarities" with contemporary tissue are leading towards a possible diagnosis of a skin disorder called exogenous ochronosis, caused by extensive use of cosmetics used to lighten the skin. What is more intriguing is the evidence of the use of such cosmetics in the royal family reigning in this period. Conclusions: So many pieces in ancient collections of Physical Anthropology will be studied in more detail by a multidisciplinary team. Among so many other results from this combined research it is possible to ascertain the correct provenance and date, to carry out a complete anthropological study and, additionally, to detect the presence of possible pathologies which would have remained unnoticed.

KEYWORDS Ancient Egypt; exogenous ochronosis; mummification; mummified head; paleopathology

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