

The Revolutionary Exhumations at St-Denis, 1793

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In July 1793, heralding the first anniversary of the French Republic that ousted the Bourbon monarchy, the new government issued a decree that shocked Europe and haunts France still. To punish the vanity of the deposed “tyrants” and to cleanse the nation of their memory, the National Convention ordered the destruction of the ancient royal tombs,¹ most of which were in the basilica of St-Denis, near Paris—for centuries France’s royal necropolis, deconsecrated in 1793 and its Benedictine monks disbanded. Operations proceeded in two stages to coincide with programs that symbolically consolidated the new republic.² For the Festival of Reunion on August 10 that marked its birth, the coffins of the oldest dynasties in the upper church of St.-Denis were emptied, lead removed for recasting, and the remains moved to a trench by the demolished Valois Chapel. The Bourbon crypt was opened as a prelude to Marie-Antoinette’s execution on October 16 (Louis was beheaded the prior January 21) and the remains (including hearts and entrails) dumped in a new trench. The bodies of the preceding Valois dynasty followed into a third trench, along with any corpses still left. The transfer dismembered most cadavers before the quicklime deposited on top could corrode them. In 1817, when the restored Bourbon monarchy returned the remains to the basilica, all that survived intact were the lower portions of three corpses. The fragments of about one hundred and fifty-eight once-sacred bodies fit into two large ossuaries in the crypt.

Their funerary monuments in the upper church were also symbolically executed. Metal monuments were melted down for arms and marbles removed until the Bourbons returned them to St-Denis twenty years later, greatly damaged and altered.

Taking to an extreme what many cultures consider heinous sacrilege, the legislated destruction of the royal burials—for many inseparable from the spontaneous Revolutionary vandalism throughout France—was an especially “obscene” campaign for millennial antinomianism, as historian Bruce Lincoln calls it,³ an attack on prevailing taboos, as part of the overthrow of the old order, to assert symbolic and psychological dominance. Artist-archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir, present at the exhumations while assembling the marbles for transfer to Paris, instead couched the campaign in religious terms. Profanation of the royal tombs, he asserted, fulfilled Jeremiah’s warning (Jer. 7:29-34; 8:1-5) that God would annihilate an entire race and scatter its buried ancestors if it deviated from divine mandate.⁴

I pursue the Judeo-Christian idiom that Lenoir used to highlight features of the infamous profanation of St-Denis that relate to the sensory culture of religion. Desecrating the dead consecrated by Catholic rites and burial is, after all, violently somatic for both perpetrator and victim. Detailed reports and memoirs of the exhumations present elements that recall the lived/felt dimensions of belief proposed by historian David Morgan: a confrontation between charged bodies, living and dead, in a charged setting and moment, that deploys sensory perception for moral judgment, leading to public acts (performance) that were alternately reverential and sacrilegious.⁵

Throughout, the encounter intertwines not only contemporary religion and politics but also religious traditions with contemporary intellectual debate.

Unlike the royal executions that triggered many popular prints and three-dimensional souvenirs, the exhumations at St-Denis appear in few images known to have circulated publicly at the time, a circumstance that belies the importance of the event. Though the aims and means of the project suggest the imperial Roman rite of *Damnatio memoriae* (erasure of specific dead emperors from public memory by destroying their remains, effigies, and public inscriptions), France's National Convention intended to eradicate all royals in a project given an ambitious Christian name, the Last Judgment of kings.⁶

Conducted under the scrutiny of officials and a mixed crowd ranging from Jacobins to St-Denis's former monks, the exhumations took an unusual, possibly unscripted form. Corpses were removed from carved sarcophagi in the upper church or draped coffins in the crypt and examined for their state of preservation. Those of the ancient dynasties were reportedly mostly ash; certain later kings were relatively well preserved; most others were badly decomposed despite embalming. The Bourbons were among the worst. The putrefied bodies of some emitted a malodorous black vapor that sickened workers before it was checked with vinegar and burned saltpeter.⁷

At face value, such findings dismiss these once-revered corpses as predictable evidence of the dangerous effect of the dead on the living, an argument that radically changed French urban burial practices from Christian forms to classical models in the eighteenth century.⁸ Symbolically, however, these exhumation chronicles of 1793 register moral judgment. Though the founding races turned to dust as nature decreed, the later putrid specimens suggested the moral taint of succeeding monarchs. An ancient reading of somatic evidence participated in the judgment. Whatever their politics, those present at the exhumations had been conditioned, like many since antiquity, to associate physical corruption with sin even among the living, especially where smells were involved. A pleasingly fragrant individual signaled moral purity; a corpse without the normal stench or decay connoted extraordinary virtue and divine favor. Formalized as the Christian doctrine of the odor of sanctity, the moral interpretation of corrupt and incorruptible flesh contributed to eighteenth-century social attitudes as disparate as sexual choice and racial discrimination.⁹

Deep in the central Bourbon crypt, the revelations of the first coffin to be opened, that of the dynasty's progenitor King Henri IV (1553-1610), caused a sensation: eerily torchlit, the corpse and shroud proved stunningly well preserved. To record the "miracle," a cast of Henri's face was taken. The resulting plaster (Fig. 1) provided an exceptionally vivid, palpable simulacrum of his face for a nation that had seen only the mediated images of him disseminated during his lifetime and beyond. Rendering the lush beard and mustache, the firm bone structure and skin, and delicate eyelashes and eyebrows of an arrestingly vigorous man, the mask offered a special authenticity as Henri's durable twin, and projected a forceful presence in gritty plaster.

Henri's mummy, as such intact corpses were then called, was then propped in its coffin

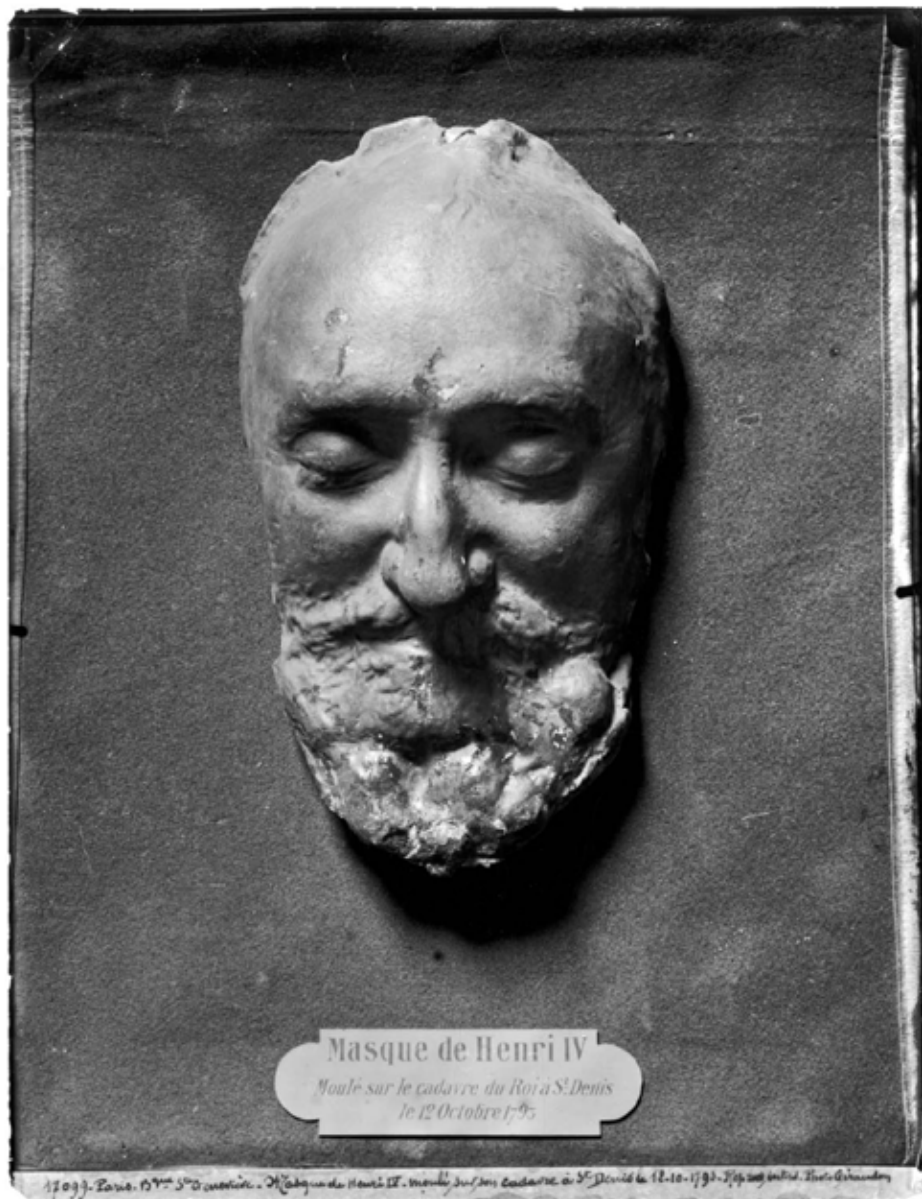


Fig. 1 Death Mask of Henry IV of France

in the crypt ambulatory for the weekend, then prominently displayed in the choir at the foot of sanctuary steps before its removal to the trench.

Only one exhumed corpse was spared: that of Louis XIV's eminent *maréchal-général* (supreme commander), Henri de La Tour d'Auvergne, vicomte de Turenne (1611-1675), France's greatest general before Napoleon. His coffin, in a small crypt below his monument in the St. Eustache chapel of the upper church, was opened just before the Bourbon crypt as a special case, reportedly because workers wanted to see a *grand homme* (exemplary citizen worthy of the nation's gratitude). Despite his noble blood and royal service, Turenne was the ideal Revolutionary commander, even during the polarized climate of 1793, for his unprepossessing humanity, deep bond to his soldiers,

and love of France. Witnesses were awed when his body emerged intact and odorless. Lenoir executed a drawing of Turenne's mummy (Fig. 2) among several of the exhumed corpses (including Henri's) that he claimed were produced "from nature" in situ.¹⁰ This drawing is nonetheless openly idealized. The shrouded body is placed on an engraved slab, floating at a distance from us in blank space, rendered in profile but with the head turned slightly towards the viewer. Revealed from the waist up, this mummy is only slightly gaunt, bearing none of the gruesome traces of the fatal cannonball shot to the abdomen, the embalming, or subsequent degradation. The swelling torso evokes a neoclassical heroic nude. The floating corpse is not given the strong chiaroscuro of a torchlit crypt, but is instead evenly, softly lit. The image suggests an icon with a certain sacrality, rather than neutral, intimate reportage or macabre sensationalism.



Fig. 2 Alexandre Lenoir, The Remains of Turenne Exhumed from his Tomb in 1793

The timing of Turenne's exhumation undoubtedly affected its impact. It was the first of the October campaign and yielded the first of the two "miraculous" mummies in close succession. In the volatile, emotional atmosphere, Turenne's corpse seemed animated by the virtues for which he was cherished. Lenoir claimed everyone believed they saw the grand homme stir with patriotic fervor,¹¹ despite the traces of fatal injury and disfigurement after death omitted from his drawing.

The witnesses' confrontation with the mummies of Turenne and Henri IV merged thought, emotion, and the senses. The encounter also triggered extraordinarily varied

actions that suggest how powerful the historic dead, in this special existential state, seemed to those present. Predictably, pieces were taken. Crowds pressed close to Turenne, displayed in a chestnut box in a small sacristy, encouraged by a guard who offered to pull teeth for a price. The prominent journalist and member of the National Convention, Camille Desmoulins, took Turenne's right little finger.¹² Whether such acts were considered reverent or sacrilegious depended on the chronicler. Responses to Henri's exhibited mummy were especially varied. Lenoir claimed, "I had the pleasure of touching these venerable remains . . . I took his hands with a certain respect that I could not resist, as true a Republican as I am."¹³ He also noted a soldier who embraced the corpse and cut a lock of the still-soft red beard as a mustache to become the modern militant Henri destined for victory over France's newest enemies.¹⁴ Others turned violent. One woman allegedly approached the displayed corpse and, cursing it as a royal, struck a blow that sent it crashing to the floor.¹⁵ Recently, forensic scientists and scholars identified a mummified head in private hands as Henri's, removed before his transfer to the trench—a sensational announcement that caused intense debate and has been challenged through study of the DNA.¹⁶

However spontaneous, the crowd's actions in 1793 seem to have drawn upon disparate forms of behavior: empirical scrutiny, religious reverence, violent hostility to power rendered present and vulnerable. What effect did this heterogenous audience have upon those who performed? There was no one community, ritual, or predictable emotion to shape this event.

The corpses of St-Denis bore complex semiotic charges surrounding France, past and present. Whether mere ash or intact corpses, this somatic material made political abstractions (a social order, ideology, or power) palpable. Even the most desultory remains stood witness to successive moments of France's history. The intact bodies—especially those of Henri and Turenne—most fully incarnated that history at especially critical points. These special dead made the remote past believable and present, in the literal sense of the word, fully there and available to the senses.

The pursuit of sensory proof at St-Denis in 1793 simultaneously invokes the antithesis of faith in Christianity, skepticism (personified, as scholars often point out, by Doubting Thomas), and a defining principle of eighteenth-century sensualism or sensibility. The latter refers to the radical rethinking of perception throughout Europe spurred by seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke and continued through the eighteenth century and beyond.¹⁷ The new approach rejected the prevailing view of a purely optical, rational process to argue the central perceptual role of the fuller, engaged body. The premise affected a wide range of disciplines and essential issues—even the very definition of humanity. For the most prominent among its Enlightenment advocates in eighteenth-century France (notably Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the pastoralist poets), the body, seeking information from the allied senses guided by unerringly accurate touch, provided the crucial agent for creative exchange between the phenomenal world and the inquiring, emotionally responsive mind. The anti-Cartesian motto of this camp ("I feel, therefore I exist"), popularized in France by pastoralist Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in the twelfth of his

Studies of Nature of 1784, demanded that the passionate, fully embodied “I” be “there.” Direct, even intimate experience of the physical world was essential for the sensitive human to produce meaning. For participants in the exhumations at St-Denis, such processes constituted a loaded dialogue with the national past, in a charged setting (the ancient royal necropolis), at a flashpoint in French history. The order to destroy the somatic roots of a compromised France proved elastic enough, before unexpected revelations, to permit those present to engage with and recruit historical traits for the new order.

Less poetically evocative than ashes or a single femur, the mummies of Turenne and Henri conjured stories in the beholders’ imagination through vision (visible resemblances that matched inherited texts and images) and touch (palpated anatomies that proved an actuality like their own); their moral worth had also been tested through smell. To judge by the reported responses of witnesses, the mummies’ high degree of preservation, ancient sign of supernatural power and divine grace, suggested that historical France was still vital, linking the beholder and beheld from different existential planes: death and life, past and present. That perceived life within the preserved bodies of Henri IV and Turenne was double-edged, for some a force to destroy, for others to deploy. The two mummies made compellingly present exceptional individuals who forged the national past, suspended in an extraordinary physical state before emotional witnesses who could touch, smell, embrace, punch, and remove parts of them to possess, if not to be magically transformed into modern greats.

The response to the discovery of the intact Turenne and Henri in 1793 easily recalls the Christian cult of saints and martyrs found miraculously preserved when exhumed.¹⁸ Their similarities, however, are limited. The remains at St-Denis were not channels to the divine. These preserved dead derived their primary power and/or culpability from their direct hand in shaping France when alive. The protagonists in the exhumations of 1793 indeed judged, as diverse individuals with diverse responses, some reverential, some antagonistic, all seeking proof, power, and a role vis-à-vis the historical personage before them. All but Turenne were condemned to the obliterating trench.

Turenne’s exhumed mummy was instead displayed for eight months at St-Denis, then again in Paris (at the Museum of Natural History) before prestigious reburial, first in Lenoir’s honorific Elysian Gardens within his Museum of French Monuments. In 1800, the new First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte had the corpse moved, in an elaborate public translation, to its present location in the main floor of Louis XIV’s Church of the Dome of the Invalides, then republican France’s Temple of Mars. The First Consul ordered the coffin buried in front of Turenne’s original monument, transferred shortly before to the Invalides from Lenoir’s Museum of French Monuments, where the republicans had deposited it after removing it from St-Denis in the 1790s. The placement of the monument and body in the prestigious public space of the Invalides made them, as never before, the ritual focus of a major religious site. There, this potent corpse presided over the militant Revolutionary French as their revered father within the architectural embodiment of France’s renewed military glory.

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Citation Guide

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Notes

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1. "Convention nationale: Suite de la séance du mercredi, 31 juillet," *Le Moniteur Universel* (August. 2, 1793): 914.

2. The most detailed account of the exhumations, Max Billard, *Les Tombeaux des rois sous la Terreur* (Paris: Perrin, 1907), draws upon material concerning the exhumations with little critical consideration of their reliability. Standardly cited texts and manuscripts, most of which are at the Archives Nationales, Paris (AN AE I 15), are problematic, many written later, several apparently quoting the same unidentified source (or each other) verbatim, and some with questionable elaborations. For a brief analysis of the texts, which can be refined, see Philippe Charlier et al., "An historical identification is not an improvisation," *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* (February 14, 2011), perma.cc/BXM6-BE56

3. Bruce Lincoln, "Revolutionary Exhumations in Spain," in *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Religion, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 114-17. Recent discussions of Revolutionary vandalism include François Souchal, *Le Vandalisme de la Révolution* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1993); and Simone Bernard-Griffiths, Marie-Claude Chemin, and Jean Ehrard, eds., *Révolution Française et "Vandalisme Révolutionnaire"* (Paris: Universitas, 1992).

4. Alexandre Lenoir, "Notes historiques sur les exhumations faites en 1793, dans l'abbaye de Saint-Denis," in *Musée des monumens français* (Paris: Imprimerie d'Hacquet, n.d. [ca. 1801]), 2: cvi.

5. For example, David Morgan, “Materiality, social analysis, and the study of religions,” in David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The matter of belief* (London: Routledge, 2010), 55-74.

6. Roger Bourderon, ed., *Saint-Denis ou le Jugement dernier des rois* (Saint-Denis: Editions PSD, 1993). Several examples of posthumous trials and executions of sovereigns exist, notably the so-called Cadaver Synod in Rome in 897 CE during which Pope Formosus was exhumed, dressed, enthroned, and tried, though sources differ on the outcome.

7. “Journal historique fait par . . . Druon (former Benedictine of St-Denis),” AN AE I 15, no. 12, *pièce* 8b.

8. Richard A. Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

9. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University of Press, 1986), 29-70.

10. Lenoir seems not to have pursued his advertised book of engravings based on these drawings.

11. Lenoir, “Notes historiques,” cvi.

12. Jean Joseph François Poujoulat, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 2 separately paginated vols. in 1 (Tours: A. Mame et Cie, 1848), 2: 87.

13. Lenoir, memorandum dated 30 frimaire year II (December 20, 1793), part 1 of *Archives du Musée des monuments français*, in *Inventaire général des richesses d’art de la France* (Paris: Plon, 1883-1887), 16.

14. Lenoir, “Notes historiques,” cxj.

15. Poujoulat, “Histoire,” 2: 86.

16. The key arguments in the debate thus far are in Charlier et al., “Multidisciplinary medical identification of a French king’s head (Henri IV),” *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* 341, no. 6805 (December 14, 2010), doi:10.1136/bmj.c6805 and subsequent responses; Charlier et al., “Historical identification;” and Maria Cheng, “New DNA tests say head isn’t French King Henri IV,” *Phys.org* (October 9, 2013), perma.cc/SEM2-A2U5

17. Discussions of different facets of the concept include Robert E. Norton, *Herder’s Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991);

Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

18. Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).