



ARE NAPOLEON'S REMAINS IN LES INVALIDES? (JANUARY 2012)

On 5 May 1821, Napoleon passed away on St Helena. Inhumed on the island four days later, his body was to remain there until October 1840, when an official French mission arrived to return the emperor to France. His mortal remains landed in Paris on 15 December that year and were laid to rest in Les Invalides.

Birth of the substitution theory

In 1969, a journalist who called himself Georges Rétif de la Bretonne (his real name was Rétif) published a book entitled *Anglais ! rendez-nous Napoléon !*. In it, he argued that between 1821 and 1840, British authorities had exhumed the emperor and replaced his body with that of his maître d'hôtel, Cipriani, who had himself died on St Helena in February 1818. Rétif went on to say that Napoleon's remains had been transferred to Westminster Abbey, where they are still to be found today, located under an (unsurprisingly) unmarked and unidentified tombstone. This theory was adopted by Bruno Roy-Henri in his book *L'énigme de l'exhumé de 1840* (published in 2000), which - through skilful management of the press surrounding its release - was to have such an effect that there are still some today who doubt that it is the emperor's body that rests under the dome.

In his book *L'histoire interdite* (2008), Frank Ferrand - a well-known historian and radio and TV presenter on Europe 1 and France 3 - intimated that he supported Roy-Henri's theories. These three historians (although Rétif is now deceased) are the only ones who support the substitution theory, a theory which has been roundly dismissed by their fellow professionals. One of the consequences of the popularisation of the theory by the French media - always on the look out for a 'sensation' - is that it is no longer unusual in France to hear the argument that we cannot really be sure that it is Napoleon in the tomb in Les Invalides without opening it up and running some tests on the remains inside.

Substitution and historical method

Historical mysteries are excellent illustrations of how it really is impossible to 'do' history - even the most elementary or simplified sort - without an element of objectivity and historical **method**. The substitution theory surrounding Napoleon's remains is a case in point. If you apply critical analysis to this theory, which is based on a single document, it begins to unravel almost before your eyes. It should be noted that the death, autopsy, burial (in 1821) and exhumation (in 1840) of Napoleon are all well "documented" episodes; these documents include official reports, minutes, letters, eyewitness accounts and even sketches executed in person. None of these documents offers any doubt over the emperor's presence in Les Invalides.

What is the substitution theory based on?

❖ Item 1

After the autopsy on 6 May, towards late afternoon on 7 May Napoleon's body was placed in a coffin made of white iron, which was encased in a wooden coffin, which itself was placed in a coffin made of lead. A fourth coffin, made from mahogany, was delivered on the evening of 8 May. The emperor was therefore buried in four coffins, a fact that is confirmed by all of the eyewitness accounts that we have. Despite this unanimous certainty, supporters of the substitution



theory have sought to make a great deal of a decidedly minor difference: the evening of 7 May, Marchand, the emperor's valet, drew up minutes which mention only three coffins.

❖ Item 2

As the body of Napoleon was exhumed on 15 October 1840 in preparation for the journey back to France, the coffins were opened up in order to confirm that they did indeed contain the emperor's body. All accounts of the event are in agreement: four coffins were removed.

❖ Item 3

Choosing to ignore the eyewitness accounts and archival documents that confirm the existence of four coffins in 1821, Georges Rétif preferred instead to concentrate on the minutes of 7 May, and subsequently announced that there were only three. If there were three coffins in 1821 and four in 1840, the only explanation was that in the meantime Napoleon's tomb had been opened, his body stolen, and Cipriani's remains left in its place. QED.

The substitution theory refuted

A great deal of 'creative thinking' is needed to base the substitution theory on a single set of minutes drawn up by Marchand who on 7 May had indeed seen three coffins but was unaware that a fourth would be delivered the next morning. This same Marchand went on to describe four coffins in his later memoirs. But Rétif and his successor were certainly not lacking in creativity: having constructed their theory by blowing out of all proportion the tiniest contradictions in the documentation, they proceeded to see only troubling inconsistencies where a simple explanation sufficed, refute all documents that disproved their theory, and over-interpret anything that could offer even the slightest opportunity for bringing so-called credibility to their argument.

Although almost silent on the "why" of the story, these two authors have however proved extremely forthcoming on the "how", often to the point of tripping up. And so, knowing that the governor of St Helena, the odious Hudson Lowe, returned to the island in 1828, they concluded that it was he who ordered the switch. It was he who oversaw the exhumation of Napoleon and Cipriani, who dressed the latter in one of the emperor's uniforms (ten years on from the servant's death it cannot have been easy), who (clumsily) replaced the decorations, the hat, and the silver boxes holding the heart and the stomach, who re-inhumed Cipriani in the tomb on St Helena, and who loaded the victor of Austerlitz's heavy coffins onto a boat bound for England and Westminster Abbey. Naturally, everything took place without anyone noticing, or recording such activity in any written document. This is despite the fact that Lowe's three days and two nights on the island were spent in near-continuous company over the course of two dinners, one review and multiple visits. Nor do the British archives mention any burial in Westminster for 1828 or 1829. Rétif and Roy-Henri's response to these objections is unsurprising: of course there are no records - the operation was top secret!

And of course, there is a conspiracy afoot

According to the substitution theorists, everyone in official circles was aware of the affair. Those present at the exhumation in 1840 who confirmed that it was the (well-preserved) body of Napoleon in the coffins were merely lying in order to avoid a war with Britain. Since then, a culture of silence has reigned. The truth has been handed down orally through the generations, and those privy to it - whether they be the British government or France's kings and presidents - have not yet felt ready to divulge their secrets. Even Napoleon III was in on it, which would



explain why he revised downwards the budget for the tomb in Les Invalides. The powers that be have sought to maintain an "official history" in order to preserve the Entente Cordiale between France and 'perfidious Albion'.

And behind this plot to deny the substitution is of course "filthy lucre". Recognising (for it is no longer a matter of proving) that Napoleon does not lie in Les Invalides would result in a drop in visitor numbers to the tomb (which receives one million visitors annually), thereby plunging the Musée de l'Armée into a financial crisis from which it would never recover.

Conclusion

Close examination of this affair, using the tools of the historian, taking into account the hard evidence and approaching the question with simple objectivity, it is clear that the substitution thesis is based on nothing more than the authors' wild imagination. It should be dismissed out of hand. And once it has been discarded, there is no longer any reason whatsoever to even consider the ridiculous idea of opening up Napoleon's tomb. There is nothing to justify the desecration of one of the most important monuments in the French national memory.

Who could request the opening of the tomb in Les Invalides?

Could the imperial family - descendants of Jerome Bonaparte - request the opening of Napoleon's tomb? At this current time, the family has no desire to seek such an outcome.

In all events, any "rights" that the descendants of the Bonaparte family have over his tomb and remains are debatable. Les Invalides is a national monument that belongs to the entire nation. It is not the prerogative of a single family - however imperial it may be - to modify its occupancy or undertake any operation of such kind, unless authorised to do so by law. Even if we were to accept that certain private individuals had the right to make such a request, ordinary law would still apply. This law dictates that such an exhumation be the unanimous request of Napoleon's direct descendants, something that the princes and princesses of the imperial family are not. In his last will and testament, the emperor recognised his sons Léon (product of his relationship with Eléonore Denuelle and born in 1806) and Alexandre (born to Marie Walewska in 1810), of whom there are today about one hundred descendants. These, and only these individuals, have the legal capacity to request the opening up of the tomb of their "great-grandfather".

Bibliography

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