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The Potential Value of Pollen Analyses in the Study of the Dead Body and Related Textiles from a Catalan Medieval Royal Grave (NE Spain)

The royal sarcophagus of the Medieval Catalan king Pere II, located in the Santes Creus monastery (Tarragona, NE Spain), was opened on November 2009 with the aim to restore his grave and to carry out a detailed study of the king's corpse. This project is currently supervised by the Museum of History of Catalonia (Barcelona).

The king Pere II died in November of 1285, but 17 years later his dead body was moved to a definitive porphyry sarcophagus in the Santes Creus monastery. The tomb was partially and briefly opened the night of September the 6th 1857.

The royal dead body was found in 2009 in a state of advanced decay, wrapped with successive textile layers and deposited on a wooden board.

Even though pollen analyses on burials and textiles are still scarce, the results provided by previous palaeobotanical studies have furnished valuable information, proving thus the value of these approaches to the study of ancient burial practices.

A pollen study has been carried out on the mummy in order to study the possible embalming procedures and the reasons which could explain the decayed state in which the body was found; confirm the season of the death; and to identify plant uses, plant offerings or mortuary practices. In order to address these questions, special attention has been paid in the pollen analyses of the king's textiles.

Microsamples have been obtained for pollen analyses in a wide range of contexts, including different parts of the body (head, thorax, hands, legs...), layers of textiles (cushion, mat and dresses made on silk, flax and wool), organs and tissues (skin, digestive system...), hairs and resins.

Preliminar pollen results show a remarkable diversity of pollen types, including both anemophilous and entomophilous plants. Furthermore, variability in pollen sets has been reported in different contexts. It can be suggested that a wide range of plants was used on the king's burial process. Also, registered pollen rain corresponds to different seasons. These results depict pollen microsampling in a wide range of contexts as an adequate strategy for the study of burials and funerary practices.

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