

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mercury poisoning in two patients with tertiary syphilis from the Ca' Granda hospital (17th-century Milan)

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Funding information

L'Oreal - UNESCO for Women in Science - Fellowship awarded to LBG; Lombardy Region, Grant/Award Number: Bando Anno 2018 per la promozione di interventi di valorizzazione di aree archeologiche, siti iscritti o candidati alla lista Unesco e itinerari culturali in Lombardia - Artt. 17, 18 E 20 L.R. 25/2016; WOA Institution: Università degli Studi di Milano; Blended DEAL: CARE

Abstract

Syphilis was a widespread infectious disease in 17th-century Italy, commonly treated with mercury-based ointments and fumigations. Few reports exist on the analysis of abnormally high Hg levels in bone as a result of exposure to mercury-containing anti-syphilitic medicine. In this research, two crania recovered among the 2.9 million commingled bones resting under the crypt of the former hospital of the poor of Milan were submitted to pathological, radiological and toxicological analysis. The crania showed gummatous lesions characteristic of tertiary syphilis and inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) analysis revealed over the double values of Hg in bone relative to that of the control sample. Archival documentation

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confirms the presence and use of mercury-based treatments in the pharmacy of the hospitals of Milan. Consequently, the individuals probably came into contact with mercury as a treatment for syphilis, confirming its medical use in 17th-century Milan and strengthening our knowledge of the history of medicine.

KEYWORDS

ancient hospital, ICP-MS, infectious disease, mercury, syphilis, syphilis treatment, venereal disease

INTRODUCTION

Syphilis (from the Latin for syphilis, *idis*) is a term coined in 1521 by the medical poet Girolamo Fracastoro (1476 or 1478–1533), which became known after the publication of his didactic poem *Syphilis sive de Morbo Gallico libri tres* in 1530. The protagonist of the poem, the shepherd Siphilus, grew unfaithful to the Sun god, and as punishment unclean ulcers appeared on his body. With this work, Fracastoro provided the first complete description of syphilis (Marcovecchio, 1992). The term syphilis also refers to the Greek *σιφιλός* (or shameful) (Blancardus, 1683), because syphilis was called the ‘disease of shame’.

Venereal syphilis is one of the four treponemal diseases, a group of bacterial infections caused by the spirochetes *Treponema pallidum*, along with bejel, pinta and yaws. Syphilis, also referred to as ‘the great mimicker’ because of its large array of clinical manifestations, progresses in three main clinical stages. Primary syphilis subsists for a few weeks and is classically marked by the formation of a painless chancre at the site of inoculation that heals swiftly, clearing locally the presence of the spirochetes. In secondary syphilis, the systemic dissemination of spirochetes induces after a few months an extensive skin rash as well as other possible symptoms, including malaise, weight loss, muscle aches, lymphadenopathy, meningitis, hepatitis and ocular inflammation (among others), which resolve spontaneously. The bacteria then enter an asymptomatic latent stage of variable duration and, if left untreated, their reactivation causes tertiary syphilis with multiple organ involvement, years to decades after the onset of infection (Ho & Lukehart, 2011; LaFond & Lukehart, 2006; Peeling & Hook, 2006). At this point, the damage is primarily neurological (with symptoms including vertigo, insomnia, emotional instability, memory impairment, hallucinations, personality changes, paresis and tabes dorsalis, and may progress to meningovascular syphilis), cardiovascular or gummatous (i.e., benign necrotic nodular lesions) (LaFond & Lukehart, 2006). Osteitis and periostitis may be seen in secondary syphilis (Ortner, 2003), but characteristic bone changes are found in tertiary syphilis and consist of gummatous bone lesions in the cranium and long bones as well as extensive periosteal reactions on long bones (Hackett, 1975).

The first recorded outbreak of syphilis occurred among the French troops of King Charles VIII in 1495 when entering Naples, leading the French to refer to the disease commonly as ‘le mal de Naples’ and the Italians as ‘il mal franzese’ or ‘morbo gallico’ (or Gallic disease). By the 17th century, syphilis was a widespread and common condition in Italy, treated with various chemical and natural methods: ointments, potions and fumigation (Tognotti, 2006). Ointments were composed of mercury, pork fat, sulfur, frankincense and myrrh (among other substances), and smeared on the joints several times a day (Micozzi & Santini, 1993). There is mention from 1552 of the use of resin, bark and wood from a tall plant called *Guaiacum sanctum*, commonly known *lignum vitae* or *lignum sanctum*. Guaiacum treatments were administered externally in ointments by friction, and internally in potions. The plant was imported from the

Dominican Republic, and as the disease was thought to originate from that region, following the principle *ubi morbus, ibi remediis*, the cure must be sought in the place where the disease emerged. However, given its high costs, regulations from 1578 aimed to limit its usage (Cosmacini, 1999; Eppenberger et al., 2017). Another tropical plant exported from the New World and adopted as an anti-syphilitic treatment is Sarsaparilla: roots of the plant of the genus *Smilax* L. were crushed to make a decoction (Branda Castiglioni, 1668). Lastly, fumigation was a painful treatment used to stimulate the release of ‘corrupt moods’ through salivation, sweat and diarrhoea: the patient was enclosed in a wooden barrel suffused with smoke of cinnabar (i.e., red mercury sulphide), from which only the head came out (Micozzi & Santini, 1993).

The present case report will discuss the finding of two crania in the sepulchral chamber O of the Ca’ Granda crypt in Milan with pathological bone signs of tertiary syphilis, and the results of inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) to measure the levels of Hg remaining in the bones.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Ca’ Granda crypt

The Ospedale Maggiore, called ‘Ca’ Granda’ by the Milanese, was founded in 1456 by Francesco Sforza in the heart of the city. It became one of the main institutions in Milan in the 16th century and a model during the Renaissance for similar healthcare institutions across Italy and Europe because of its innovative and avant-garde free medical assistance to the poor, care of the ill and scientific activity. From 1637 to 1697, the crypt located below the church of the *Beata Vergine Annunciata* within the hospital grounds became the place of burial of the deceased patients of the hospital (Agosti & Stoppa, 2017, pp.67–71; Cosmacini, 1999, 2001; Vaglianti & Cattaneo, 2013). As part of the Ca’ Granda Project undertaken by the University of Milan and the Hospital Foundation for Cultural Heritage of the Ospedale Maggiore, campaigns of archaeological excavations of the sepulchral chambers of the crypt have revealed the presence of an estimated 2.9 million commingled bones. Their archaeological excavation and anthropological study of the remains are currently underway and organized by the University of Milan and Laboratorio di Antropologia e Odontologia Forense (LABANOF—Laboratory of Forensic Anthropology and Odontology).

Crania CG190-706 and CG190-1808

Both crania were found among the commingled remains of sepulchral chamber O, dated through detailed historical records and archives of the hospital specifying its use from 1637 (the date of the creation of the sepulchral chambers) to 1697 (the date of the creation of a cemetery dedicated to the deceased patients of the hospital outside of the city walls).

Anthropological analysis

The crania were assessed for age at death, sex and population affinity using standard methods (Hefner, 2009; Hefner & Ousley, 2014; Mann et al., 1991; Ubelaker, 1978; Walker, 2008). Pathological analysis was performed following standard methods and references (Aufderheide & Rodríguez-Martín, 1998; Buikstra, 2019; Ortner, 2003; Waldron, 2008) and paleopathological diagnosis of tertiary syphilis following Hackett (1975, 1976).

Radiological imaging

The two crania were imaged using computed tomography (CT). Both crania were placed on the CT table by lying on the skull base to ensure greater stability during scanning. As a consequence, the resulting scans were directly obtained on a coronal plane. CT scans were performed using a 64-slice CT system (Somatom Definition As, Siemens Medical Imaging, Erlangen, Germany). We used a standard protocol for brain CT acquisition, with the following parameters: field of view (FOV) = 200 mm, section thickness = 1 mm with a reconstruction interval of 0.625 mm, 120 kVp, 138 mA. CT images were post-processed with multiplanar reconstructions by applying different types of filters using the Siemens Syngo-via console.

Toxicological analyses

Samples of about 0.5 g were cut with a handsaw from the occipital bone of both crania. In addition, a sample collected from the diaphysis of a radius with an incompletely fused proximal epiphysis (age at death < 17 years) from the same sepulchral chamber and without signs of syphilis was chosen as a control specimen. The bone of a juvenile individual was selected as a control sample based on the assumption that, given his age, the individual would be less likely to have been treated with or exposed to mercury in his short lifetime (external contamination), while representing the normal physiological concentration of mercury in modern era Milan.

The samples were prepared and processed as conventional matrices following (Di Candia, Biehler-Gomez, et al., 2020, Di Candia, Muccino, et al., 2020). Validation data, metal dosage and instrumental conditions were performed as per previous studies (Di Candia, Biehler-Gomez, et al., 2020, Di Candia, Muccino, et al., 2020).

RESULTS

Cranium CG190-706

The cranium was complete; only a portion of the right zygomatic process was damaged post-mortem and the mandible was absent. White staining of taphonomic origin remained on the anterior portion of the frontal bone, even after careful washing. Anthropological estimations of sex (Walker, 2008) and age at death (Mann et al., 1991) revealed a male aged 20–24 years.

The frontal, parietal and right zygomatic bones showed osseous lesions. In particular, confluent clustered pits converging in focal points can be seen on the zygomatic and parietal bones, whereas destructive changes on the frontal bone are more severe, showing clustered pits, marked cavitation and bone erosions and in some discrete areas, nodular formation (Figs 1 and 2). Cortical destruction of the outer table is more extensive than that of the diploe, suggesting an inward progression of the lesions. The observed cranial lesions correspond to stages 6–7 of caries sicca (Hackett, 1975).

Cranium CG190-1808

The cranium was complete, but the mandible was absent. Both zygomatic processes were damaged post-mortem, and the left maxilla showed a break of continuity of the bone tissue, corresponding to a post-mortem fracture. The left parietal and occipital bones evidenced

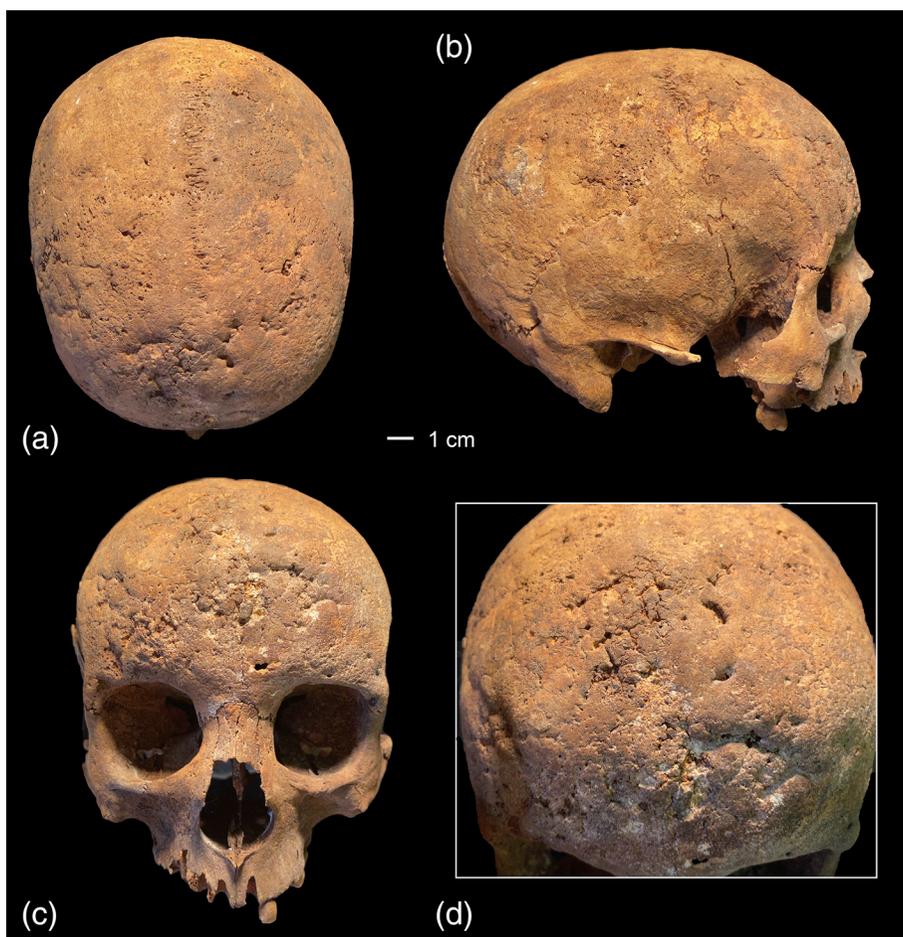


FIGURE 1 Cranium CG190-706: (a) Norma verticalis; (b) Norma lateralis; (c) Norma frontalis; and (d) details of the osteolytic bone destruction and nodular formation on the frontal bone

taphonomic bone cracking and flaking, comparable with stage 2 of weathering (Behrensmeyer, 1978), as well as a large region of loss of substance in the posterior area of the left parietal bone (about 43 mm in diameter) of post-mortem origin. Anthropological estimations of sex (Walker, 2008) and age at death (Mann et al., 1991; Mincer et al., 1993; Moorrees et al., 1963; Ubelaker, 1978) showed a female aged between 16 and 20 years.

Pathological lesions were present on the frontal and parietal bones and are comprised of fine clusters of pits encircling large and deep osteolytic lesions varying from 5 to 36 mm in diameter, breaching both the external table and the diploe (Figs 3 and 4). The greater extension of the lesion on the outer table indicates an inward progression of the lesions. Two lesions in particular, located at the glabella and on the right parietal bone, also perforated the internal table. The cranial lesions correspond to a stage 6 of caries sicca (Hackett, 1975).

ICP-MS results

ICP-MS analyses revealed the following Hg values: cranium CG190-706 = 1.41 mg/kg, cranium CG190-1808 = 0.64 mg/kg, and control sample = 0.38 mg/kg.

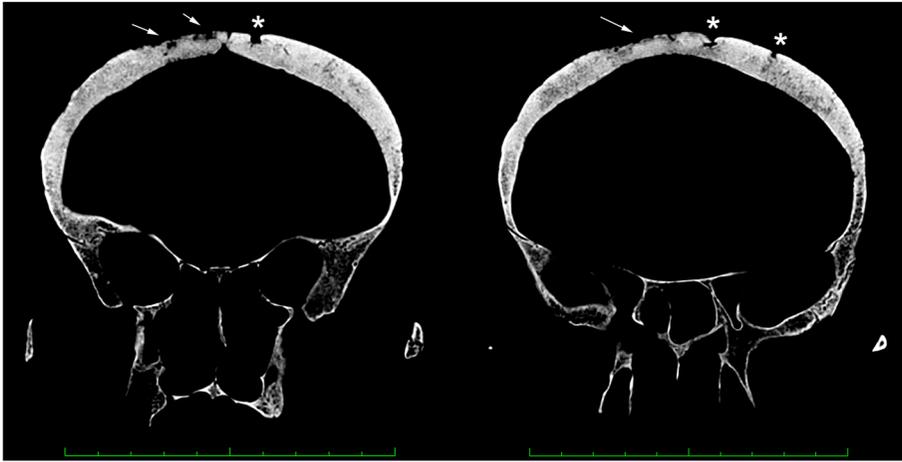


FIGURE 2 Coronal computed tomographic (CT) sections of cranium CG190-706. Note the osteolytic destruction of the external table (arrows) and the nodular formation around some osteolytic lesions (asterisks)

DISCUSSION

The anthropological and paleopathological analyses of the two crania revealed two young adults, a male and a female, with deformative osteolytic and osteoblastic lesions on the external table of the frontal and parietal bones including bone destruction and nodular formation, consistent with stages 6–7 caries sicca.

The major differential diagnosis for osteolytic cranial lesions includes taphonomic alterations, Langerhans cell histiocytosis, leukaemia, multiple myeloma, metastatic carcinoma and syphilitic caries sicca. Taphonomic degradation of bone, and in particular osteophageous insects and roots, do not show a preference for specific areas of the skeleton and would not show nodular cavitation (Ortner, 2003). Langerhans cell histiocytosis encompasses three clinical syndromes predominantly affecting children (Dorfman & Czerniak, 1998). Bone lesions in leukaemia present as diffuse superficial solitary pits (Rothschild et al., 1997). Multiple myeloma and metastatic carcinoma predominantly affect individuals over 40 years of age, with bone lesions emerging within the diploe and progressing toward the external and internal tables (Biehler-Gomez et al., 2019a, 2019b; Biehler-Gomez & Cattaneo, 2021; Ortner, 2003; Strouhal, 1991). In the present case, destructive bone changes showed an inward progression. The abundant blood supply to the bone marrow and periosteum tends to make these structures a good reservoir of infection. The causative organism is borne through the blood stream to all parts of the body. The disease is thus propagated via the blood stream, and the invasion of the periosteum or bone is to be expected. The lesions observed in this study correspond to caries sicca, a pathognomonic marker of tertiary syphilis (Hackett, 1975). On the one hand, cranium CG190-706 showed destructive bone lesions as well as nodular bone lesions, observable both macroscopically and on CT scans, suggesting a more advanced stage of progression of the gummatous lesion. On the other hand, cranium CG190-1808 exhibited more extensive and severe osteolytic destruction, with a higher number of cortically erosive lesions and a more widespread distribution, but no nodular formation was noted through gross macroscopic observation or radiological examination.

The Ospedale Maggiore was dedicated to the treatment of patients with curable or acute diseases and without financial means (Cosmacini, 1992, 2001). By opposition, the Ospedale del Brolo was the Milanese hospital specialized in the care of syphilitic patients. However, as the

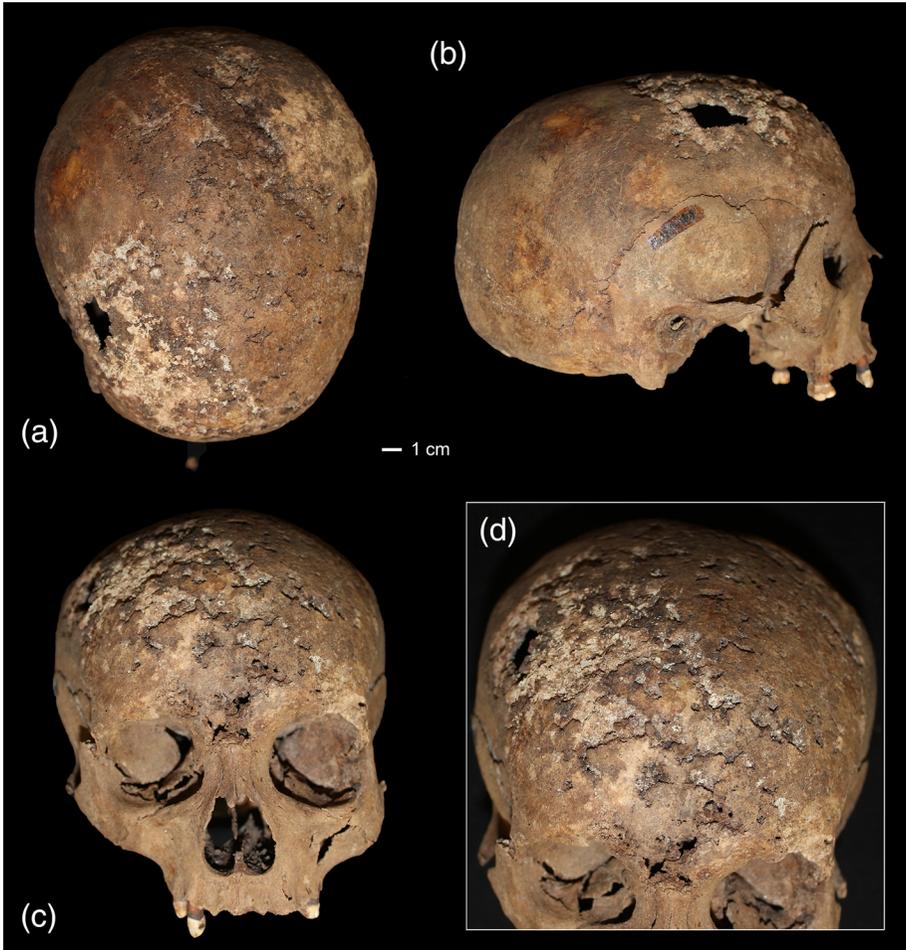


FIGURE 3 Cranium CG190-1808. (a) Norma verticalis; (b) Norma lateralis; (c) Norma frontalis; and (d) details of the osteolytic bone destruction on the frontal bone

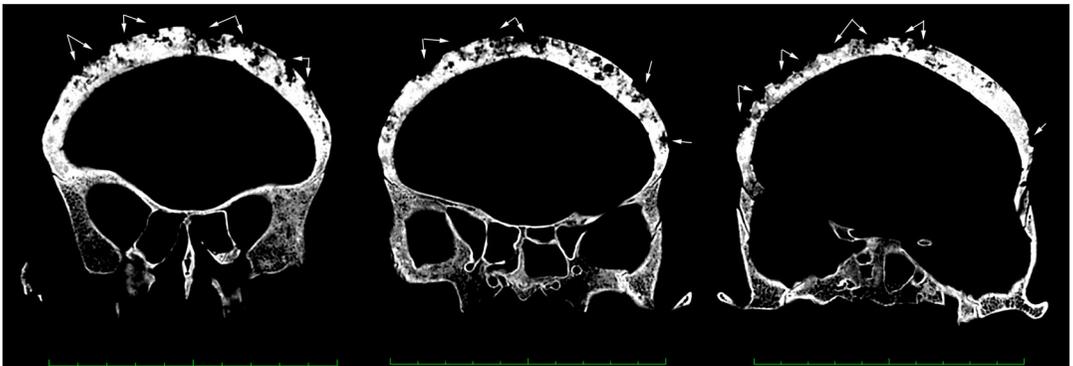


FIGURE 4 Coronal computed tomographic (CT) sections of cranium CG190-1808. Note the extensive bone destruction of the external table and to a lesser extent, the diploë (arrows)

Ca' Granda grew in notoriety, the Brolo lost in importance. The closure of the hospital was finally decided on 12 December 1631, and all the patients hospitalized at the Brolo were progressively transferred to the Ca' Granda (Belloni, 1958; Bevacqua, 2004; Canetta, 1887). Therefore, it is not surprising to find two cases with tertiary and long-standing syphilis in the crypt of the Ca' Granda as their presence could be the result of the closure of the Ospedale del Brolo. Another hypothesis could be that they presented to the hospital with acute symptoms (e.g., related to neurosyphilis or cardiovascular complications), which would explain the presence of two chronic long-standing cases of syphilis in Ca' Granda. Moreover, these individuals may have been admitted to the hospital based on their social condition of poverty. Given the commingling situation in the sepulchral chambers, no other information could be extrapolated to clarify the reason for the presence of these two individuals in Ca' Granda hospital.

The most common anti-syphilitic therapies in modern era Italy were based on the use of mercury compounds (in the form of ointments by friction or fumigation) or phytopharmaceuticals derived from tropical plants imported from the New World, in particular Guaiacum and Sarsaparilla (in the form of decoction for ointments or potions) (Porro et al., 2009). In fact, discussions at the time divided physicians over the use of these two categories of medicine (Bellini, 1934). The inventories of the hospital pharmacy of the main medical institutions of Milan (including Ca' Granda and Ospedale del Brolo), preserved today in the archives of the former hospital of Milan, show that at the end of 1617 and 1623 there were still present sarsaparilla, lignum sanctum, mercury ointment, ointment for the *morbo gallico*, 'argento vivo' (or quicksilver, the common name for mercury) and 'argento vivo ex (tint) o' (or extinct quicksilver, the name given to mercury that had been crushed until no metallic globule was visible) (Galimberti, 2014). This finding shows that treatments based on mercury were indeed present in the pharmacy of the Brolo and Ca' Granda hospitals and used to treat syphilis in 17th-century Milan.

Background concentrations of Hg in trabecular and cortical tissues in long bones are set at 0.30 and 0.08 mg/kg, respectively (Rasmussen et al., 2015). Generally, Hg levels are higher in trabecular bone tissues (Rasmussen et al., 2017). From the literature, it is not entirely clear what is the expected level of Hg in cranial bones, which is why the cranial samples were collected by sampling both cortical and trabecular tissue. The Hg concentrations found in the syphilitic crania were over double the value found in the control sample (without bone signs of syphilis). The toxicological results obtained are in line with previous studies on dry bone Hg levels in syphilitic cases due to treatment (Kepa et al., 2012; Rasmussen et al., 2008; Tucker, 2007). The bone tissue is composed of organic matrix, inorganic matrix and water. The interaction between bone water and the blood stream is essential for the incorporation of metal ions. Thus, the ions are incorporated through the process of bone remodelling during primary or secondary mineralization. A fraction of Hg ions remains trapped inside the bone matrix and can be detected after death (Giordano et al., 2021). The high concentrations of the metal in the crania can be explained by its accumulation in the bone by contact absorption permeating from the mercury-containing ointment through the skin and diffusing into the tissues via the bloodstream (Kepa et al., 2012). The Hg levels detected in the control sample are consistent with normal Hg concentrations in humans and reflect the control values of previous research (Kepa et al., 2012). Cranium CG190-706 showed over twice the concentration of Hg found in cranium CG190-1808. Although a definitive explanation for this difference cannot be drawn, factors that may have had an influence on the bone concentrations of Hg include time, duration and quantity of metal exposure.

The treatment of mercury may not be associated with a specific hospital (i.e., Ospedale del Brolo or Ospedale Maggiore) as the pharmacy was shared within the district. Theoretically, and despite the knowledge that mercury-based remedies were present in the pharmacy of the hospitals at the time of hospitalization of both CG190-706 and CG190-

1808, it is possible that these individuals may have been treated with mercury even before their admission to the hospital and then had required treatment at Ca' Granda for other causes.

These findings suggest that a remedy with a mercury basis was applied in the two discussed cases, and archival documents show that the pharmacy of the Ca' Granda and Brolo hospitals possessed large quantities of mercury-based treatments in the 17th century. Whether the institution administering the heavy metal as a medical treatment for syphilis was the Ospedale del Brolo, Ca' Granda hospital or both, cannot be confirmed, given that the patients of Brolo hospital were transferred to Ca' Granda after its closure. Even if the individuals had been patients at Brolo hospital and were later admitted to Ca' Granda, the finding of Hg ions can be associated with previous medical treatment for syphilis that remained entrapped within the bone matrix. Regardless of the impossibility to confirm where the mercury-based remedy occurred, these results attest of the use of mercury as a syphilitic treatment in the 17th-century Milan, corroborating historical accounts (Micozzi & Santini, 1993) and strengthening our knowledge of the history of medicine.

CONCLUSIONS

During archaeological excavations, two crania with extensive bone lesions were found in the sepulchral chambers of the crypt of the Ca' Granda hospital in Milan and submitted to anthropological, pathological, radiological and toxicological analyses. Results revealed two young individuals, a male and a female, with benign gummatous lesions typical of tertiary syphilis. Mercury levels showed very high concentrations of the metal in the crania with respect to the control sample. These results are consistent with the use of mercury as an anti-syphilitic remedy. Moreover, examination of the archives at the former hospital of the poor of Milan evidenced that mercury-based ointments and decoctions were present at the time of hospitalization of the two individuals of the present research, strengthening the possibility of mercury poisoning as part of an anti-syphilitic therapy. Very few studies investigating Hg levels in bones exist to test the possible use of the metal as a treatment against syphilis (or even leprosy). In this research, our results suggest that the individuals may have received mercury-based treatments for syphilis at the hospital, confirming that mercury was used as a treatment for syphilis in 17th-century Milan and strengthening our knowledge of the history of medicine.

FUNDING

L.B.G. was awarded a L'Oréal–UNESCO grant 'For Women in Science' Italian edition. The Ca' Granda project was funded by the Lombardy Region for three years (*Bando anno 2018 per la promozione di interventi di valorizzazione di aree archeologiche, siti iscritti o candidati alla lista UNESCO e itinerari culturali in Lombardia—artt. 17, 18 e 20 L.r. 25/2016*). Open Access Funding provided by Università degli Studi di Milano within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/arc.12721>.

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How to cite this article: Biehler-Gomez, L., Mattia, M., Sala, C., Giordano, G., Di Candia, D., Messina, C., Sconfienza, L. M., Franchini, A. F., Porro, A., Galimberti, P. M., Slavazzi, F., & Cattaneo, C. (2021). Mercury poisoning in two patients with tertiary syphilis from the Ca' Granda hospital (17th-century Milan). *Archaeometry*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/arc.12721>