

What Napoléon I died from

Napoléon was poisoned to death. There are four evidence for this. The first is his symptoms during the five years he was ill. The least interrupted description comes from Louis Joseph Marchand. As the leading of the three valets he saw Napoléon almost every day. In his diary Louis wrote down what he witnessed on Saint Helena. It was amongst other things how the ex-emperor felt and which symptoms he had. His observations are confirmed by the testimony from Napoléon's good friend Henri Gratien Bertrand. Henri held a formal office but had no real tasks. One could well say he got paid for keeping Napoléon company. We also have testimony from another friend who was named Gaspard Gourgaud. In contrast with Henri he was employed to assist Napoléon. Gaspard fell ill himself on several occasions. Eventually he decided to move for reasons of health. Gaspard consequentially was not with Napoléon until he died. On the other hand Louis and Henri were. In addition there are case records from the four physicians which examined Napoléon: Barry Edward O'Meara, John Stokoe, Francesco Antommarchi and Archibald Arnott. The person they describe is **not** a cancer patient. Instead they describe a person who repeatedly has been poisoned by certain substances.

The second evidence is the state of the inner organs at the autopsy. Francesco was the most qualified person who was present. He found no tumour much less the metastases which would have been required to kill him. The assertion that he would have done so is based on a mistranslation. On the contrary his description of the inner organs matches exactly the poisoning which will be explained later. However, Francesco did not know this: he thought Napoléon had died from hepatitis. The necessary knowledge simply did not exist yet.

The third evidence is the fact that the dead Napoléon did not decompose normally. Despite he had not been intentionally mummified the body had barely decomposed at all in 19 years! It has been pointed out that a carcass can be preserved under certain circumstances. But those circumstances mean constant cold alternatively a very dry climate. No-one of the circumstances reined on the site where Napoléon was buried. The body was never in contact with the soil so chemical interaction with it is eliminated. The innermost coffin was airtight and out of metal. If it had been heated up over a bonfire it would had stopped the decomposition. (The tin was invented so they knew that it worked but not how.) However, this could not have happened without people noticing. Furthermore, the dead man would have smelled like baked meat when the coffin was opened.

The forth evidence is the chemical analyses which have been made on hair samples from Napoléon. At least 16 such measurements have been done since 1960. They have only tested samples of which authenticity has been certified by those persons which originally got them from him. (It is thus not enough with hearsay.) One of them even wrote that he had taken the hair himself from the dead Napoléon's body! All the tested hair samples have the same colour and texture. It makes it

likely that they came from the same person. Hair samples taken at different occasions have different arsenic contents. But it is always considerably higher than what is normal. It has been suggested that the arsenic is a contamination as a consequence of the hair being treated with arsenic preparations. It is impossible since the content is precisely as high in the in the middle of the hairs. Furthermore, the hairs taken after his death contained two other poisons too. The last 16 millimetres contained antimony and the last millimetre mercury as well. The measurements have been made by several scientists at different laboratories. Several different methods have been used. Please note that hairs don't suck up things faster than they grow. It makes it on the other hand possible to calculate exactly when the poisoning occurred.

Four of the measurements deviate from the pattern. All the four deviating results have been done by the same team of scientists. Despite the hair samples had been taken at different occasions they show the same arsenic content. It was in turn two and a half times as high as the highest of the other measurements. A possible explanation is that they only measured the outside of the hairs. The results would then be due to a contamination which they did not think about taking away, something all others seem to have thought of. People who claim those measurements to be reliable also assert that it was normal at the time. It is certainly true that it is possible to get used to arsenic. But that it should hold for a whole population of 26 million people is patently absurd. Some claim that people used to utilise arsenic to wash wine barrels and wine bottles. Why would they have utilised a well-known poison for that? Furthermore, Napoléon was a moderate drinker. There were thus many people which drunk more wine than him. Others assert that Napoléon would have fallen victim to his own arsenic abuse. Arsenic can really be abused. However, no contemporary testimonies suggest he had such an addiction. The only thing he was addicted to was snuff. On the other hand it was the only unhealthy habit we know he had.

That Napoléon had died from cancer was first suggested by Charles Tristan de Montholon. It has turned out he often lied. On Saint Helena he lied so much he got the nickname *il bugiardo* (*the liar* in Italian). Several times he asserted things which are against modern medical knowledge. Sometimes he even contradicted himself! It has been claimed that metastases from Napoléon are preserved at Royal College of Surgeon's museum. On the can with alcohol is a label saying it is a gift from Barry. Unfortunately the tissues in the can are lymphatic nodes not metastases. There is not even any sensible reason to think they come from Napoléon. Barry was not present at the autopsy since he had left the island three years earlier. If he had ever operated Napoléon we would have known it. That Napoléon's pants shrunk steadily in size has been taken as evidence that he had died from cancer. On that toxicologist Pascal Kintz – who did some of the chemical analyses – answered:

“You don't decide that someone is suffering from cancer by measuring the size of his trousers.”

Napoléon did in fact lose much in weight before he died. But this was due to severe lack of appetite not due to cancer. During the last six weeks severe vomiting also played a part. Please note that stomach cancer is not hereditary. It was just supposed to be hereditary by people which had pre-scientific thoughts of heredity. Many other diseases have been suggested as causes of Napoléon's death. In most cases they are based on certain symptoms not all or even most! Some are even based on symptoms which Charles has made up!

High arsenic contents have also been found in hairs which were taken from Napoléon before 1816. Some claim this must mean he was not poisoned to death. They have not understood it was a matter of sub-lethal arsenic poisoning. "Sub-lethal" means potentially lethal but not necessary so. The poisoned may thus survive and recover eventually. It was what happened to Napoléon in 1805, 1812, 1813, 1814 and 1815. When he arrived to Saint Helena he had completely recovered from the last of them. People which recover from sub-lethal poisoning shows symptoms of chronic arsenic poisoning. Persons who missed the sub-lethal attacks have suggested alternative arsenic sources. Amongst other things one has suspected the wallpapers in Napoléon's bedroom and living-room. The wallpapers were coloured with Scheele's green. The walls where so damp they grew mouldy and emitted vapour forms of arsenic. The problem is that the suspicious wallpapers where put up three years **after** Napoléon fell ill. Furthermore, the statistics points against a source in the environment. All in all twelve people where poisoned: six adult men, four adult women, a teenage boy and a little girl. Environmental poisoning affects children at first hand. There where at least three more children in the same house but they did not fell ill. On the other hand two of the affected women did not even live on the same address! Not counting Napoléon three persons died. It was his best friend Franceschi Cipriani, one of the women, and the little girl. However, in Napoléon's case arsenic was not the ultimate poison as we will see.

When Napoléon delivered himself up to the Britons a few friends and servants voluntary followed him. Furthermore an old enemy unexpectedly turned up. It was Charles who offered to follow him anywhere. We don't know why Napoléon accepted him. It may have been because he was so eager to follow him. It may also have been the prospect of having sex with his rather lose wife Albine Héléne. Yes, he did have sex with her! In June 1816 she had a daughter who was christened Héléne de Montholon. We still don't know who her dad was.

Napoléon's employees and friends treated him as a ruling monarch as long as he lived. Britons which meet him personally spooked to him as a foreign monarch if he had not said that they did not need to. Officially he was called General Bonaparte at the beginning even lieutenant-general Bonaparte! For a start the party was kept on board a ship which was anchored outside England's coast. For security reasons Napoléon was not allowed to get ashore. During the time the British government discussed what they would do with him. General Arthur Wellesley (better known as the duke of Wellington) recommended Saint Helena. It was easy to guard and had a

pleasant climate. Arthur had visited the island himself when he was on the way home from India. This is how it ended up of course. The party was transferred to another ship with destination Saint Helena. 69 days later they were there. It was in October 1815. The Britons tried to make it as comfortable for Napoléon as possible. As long as it did not prevent them from guarding him, of course. They tried to protect him at least as much as preventing attempted escape. The island was easily made escape-proof. The coasts consist of high, steep rocks. The British government kept track of everyone who went ashore or left the harbour. It was only one more place where it was considered possible to get down to the shore. Every ship which approached the place would be stopped by the British navy.

Also economically the Britons tried to make sure Napoléon would do. He got maintenance from the British government equivalent of the governor's salary. His expenses exceeded this sum with about two thirds. Now this was not any bigger problem. Napoléon had had large sums with him when he had delivered himself up to the Britons. This the Britons knew about. They had counted all his possessions when he left France. Napoléon had to hold on to his money but still lived a comfortable life. At his death he owned enough money for Charles to be able to inherit a fortune. However, it was Charles who had subdued him to bequeath a fortune to him.

Napoléon would get to live in a mansion which was known by the name Longwood House. But it had to be renovated and extended first. It took about two months. During the time Napoléon lived in a pavilion which was situated in the garden of a rich family's house. There he lived with five male followers. He liked to ride and work in Longwood House' garden. When his legs became too weak to allow riding he instead used to take rounds in his carriage. Indoors he could read, dictate, play billiards, chess and card games with Henri. Napoléon preferred outdoor activities. Had he decided to keep indoors he easily become bored.

During February to April 1816 Napoléon felt ill for a couple of days in the middle of each month. At the turn of the month April/May he fell ill again. He had been stricken by sub-lethal arsenic poisoning. Before he had recovered completely he was stricken one more time. So it continued year after year. No contemporary physician could tell what Napoléon suffered from. Therefore the repeated sub-lethal poisonings could continue for years. It took until the 1950ies until someone found out what Napoléon had suffered from. It became possible through the publication of Louis' diaries.

Until July 1818 Napoléon step by step become worse and worse. Barry was then his physician. Then Barry was forced to leave the island by the governor Hudson Lowe. John met the sick man for a short time in January 1819. He could find out Napoléon was now not quite as ill. Sometime during 1819 it was instead Charles who fell ill. However, to all appearances it was a different disease than the one Napoléon suffered from. In September 1819 Francesco arrived to Saint Helena. When they first met he could say Napoléon was not seriously ill. Napoléon was the least ill during the southern winter of 1820. Still, he was never free of symptoms.

Afterwards he only got worse largely seen. During all this time Francesco was there on the island. The last six weeks he was assisted by Archibald. He was not as skilled a physician as Francesco was. But in contrast to Francesco he used a clinical thermometer. He could by this mean witness that Napoléon did not have fever despite he felt feverish.

A little more than six weeks before Napoléon died the arsenic was partly replaced with antimony. Two days later Charles offered to nurse him during the nights. It was normally Jean Abram Noverraz' job. But he had suddenly fallen ill. The antimony resulted in violent vomiting. Eventually his stomach was so overworked he stopped to vomit. Francesco and Archibald begun to worry about if he would survive. Charles wrongfully asserted that calomel had once saved Napoléon's life. Archibald agreed to give it a chance but not Francesco. Two other physicians were called in so they could discuss the issue. All except Francesco allowed themselves to be subdued. Napoléon was given an enormous dose of calomel. Earlier the same day he had been fooled to swallow a drink which was seasoned with bitter almonds. Potassium cyanide from the bitter almonds reacted with the acidity of the stomach and with the mercury salt calomel. The result was other mercury salts, mercuric cyanide and free mercury. As a consequence of the poisoning Napoléon now lay helpless in his bed. Within 36 hours after he had swallowed the medicine he had lost his consciousness. After a little more than 48 hours he was dead. It was in the evening of the 5th of May 1821. Someone may have suspected he had been poisoned to death. However, in that case it has not been written down.

The following day an autopsy was performed on the dead man. Francesco had the company of seven British physicians but it was he who held the scalpel. After the autopsy hair and beard-stubble was shaved off. A cast was made of the front half of the head together with parts of the neck and some of the chest. The dead man was washed and dressed. Eventually the body was laid in a coffin out of tin. The tin coffin was soldered close and placed in one of wood. It was in turn placed in one of lead which was also soldered close. The lead coffin was placed in one more of wood. Napoléon was buried there on Saint Helena in a place which is called Sane Valley. There the Britons had built a grave vault out of stone. On the other hand, it was his followers which organised the funeral. When Napoléon was dead and buried the followers could return to Europe.

In 1840 king Louis Philippe decided that Napoléon's coffin should be brought to France. A French ship was sent to Saint Helena. Several people which had known Napoléon were present when the grave was opened. When the innermost coffin was cut open they got the surprise of their life. The dead man was almost intact! Everyone who remembered how Napoléon had looked recognised the dead man. The body's high arsenic content – combined with the two airtight coffins – had stopped almost all decomposition. The three innermost coffins were kept. They were placed in an additional one out of lead then in two more out of wood. (All wooden coffins were made of different woods.) Finally it was laid in a sarcophagus out of red porphyry in the Invalides in Paris. There he lies buried to this day.

There were two persons which could have poisoned Napoléon. One was Charles who was in charge of the wine cellar. The other was the valet Étienne Saint-Dennis. He went by the nickname Ali. No-one of the two had any good alibi. There is no real evidence against any of them but the indications against Charles are considerably more. Several times he said to people that a new attack was to be expected. Then he was usually right. Furthermore, he knew several months in advance which symptoms Napoléon would get. He wrote it in letters to his wife which he sent after she had left the island. In present tense he described things which had yet not occurred! 25 years later he wrote a book about his experiences on Saint Helena. His description differs radically from the other persons'. Certain parts are so artificial they only add to the suspicions against him. Nothing suggests Ali knew in advance what would happen to Napoléon. He did not come with any obviously exorbitant assertions either. Something Charles did several times in his book. Ali is also less likely for another reason. Imagine someone has poisoned another man to death 19 years ago. He gets an invitation to be present when the victim's grave is opened. The victim will be shown to him and several others. Would he then accept? Ali was present on Saint Helena when Napoléon's grave was opened. Charles was the only invited one who was not present despite he would have been able to.

Many others have been suspected for poisoning Napoléon. Here is a list of them:

- Hudson was governor of Saint Helena during the entire time Napoléon was ill. But he had nothing to do with what Napoléon ate and drunk. He has been unfairly blamed for something he could neither had done nor prevented.
- Similar arguments can be used about the British sentries. They never handled the food and drink which was specially intended for Napoléon. Their job was instead to keep him under supervision. If someone treated him with violence they would also protect him. Napoléon's own food and drink was handled by six followers. These were Charles, Henri, Louis, Ali, Abram and Jean Baptiste Pierron.
- Henri and his family were the only followers which did not live in Longwood House. (They lived in a house nearby.) It was only the last six weeks he at all handled Napoléon's food and drink. He then helped to nurse Napoléon who had become so weak he needed help 24 hours a day. It was always during daytime except for the last but one night. Until then Napoléon was worst in the nights when Charles nursed him.
- Louis seems to have been the person who most nursed Napoléon. The problem with him is that he was one of the six adult men which had been stricken by sub-lethal arsenic poisoning. An assassin who poisons himself is too clumsy to avoid detection!
- Abram has an excellent alibi. To the day six weeks before Napoléon died he was stricken by sub-lethal arsenic poisoning. He barely recovered in time to bid farewell to his dying ruler. By then Napoléon already laid unconscious.
- Jean was Longwood House' cook. He did not know which portion would be served to whom. Consequentially he could not poison Napoléon without poison-

ing everyone who ate with him. People which ate with Napoléon rarely fell ill. On the contrary everyone had their own wine bottle which makes the one who was in charge of the wine cellar more suspicious. Sure, Jean served the desserts. But several times Napoléon become worse without having eaten any dessert.

- The four physicians mentioned in the first paragraph have been accused for causing Napoléon's death. The problem is that Napoléon was ill even when no-one of them where there. Furthermore, he was sceptic to physicians. It was easy to count the times he swallowed any medicine at all.

Napoléon may have called Charles “the most faithful of the faithful”. However, he just became fooled by an unusually ingratiating hypocrite. It was how Charles got Napoléon's trust: though his constant ingratiation. Furthermore, Napoléon lived in the illusion that loyalty could be bought. It is hard to think Charles could have nursed Napoléon – helped him with things he in fact needed help with – without feeling some kind of sympathy. He may have thought something like “I have to kill him but I can't let him suffer more than necessary.”

It is entirely possible Charles acted on his own. In that case he was solely responsible for Napoléon's death. There is no evidence for any conspiracy. If Napoléon fell victim to any such there were two possible assignors. One was Charles' close friend and France' crown prince Charles Philippe de Capet. The crown prince was a well-known intriguer who advocated political assassinations. The other was Charles' adoptive dad Charles Louis de Sémonville. We know that Charles visited him shortly before he joined Napoléon. Was it an issue of a conspiracy there where likely only two persons which knew what was really going on. These would in that case have been the assassin himself and his assignor. Was there an assignor Charles would not have had any choice. Had he refused he would have been killed so that he could not reveal anything. Someone else had followed Napoléon with secret commission to poison him.

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2014-12-18

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