

Pharaoh Menes' death after an anaphylactic reaction – the end of a myth

J. W. Krombach*, S. Kampe, C. A. Keller, P. M. Wright

Key words: allergy; anaphylaxis; Pharaoh Menes; wasp sting.

The death of Pharaoh Menes after a wasp sting in 2600 BC is reported to be the first account of an anaphylactic reaction (1, 2). This, now largely unchallenged, truth is supposedly documented by hieroglyphs on his sarcophagus and tomb. However, the cited original literature was never reviewed upon its evidence. We present the underlying historical facts, setting a final end to the myth of an ancient documented fatal anaphylactic shock.

Pharaoh Menes was a mythical figure from the earliest Egyptian civilization; later dynasties believed that he was the first Pharaoh and unifier of Upper and Lower Egypt (3). He is credited with the introduction of papyrus and writing, as well as founding cities, building important dikes and other works of significance (3–5). But Menes probably never even lived. Modern accounts now assume that 'Menes' was an alternative title for another king (either Narmer or Aha) (3–5). Ancient documents about the life of the Pharaoh were not made contemporaneously. His name first appears in hieroglyphs made about 1300 years after his death, giving no detail of his life or

activities (3). After another 1000 years his name appears again in the work of the ancient Egyptian historian Manetho (4). Manetho assigns great significance to Menes and his work remains the main source of detail on this mythical figure. Burial grounds that might have been Menes' have all been empty and devoid of clearly identifying hieroglyphics (3–5).

What do we know about the death of Menes? Egyptologists interpret the account of Manetho – that Menes was killed in an encounter with a hippopotamus – to fit with the modern view of a mythical figure (3). However, other versions of Menes death exist. Diodorus Siculus reports that Menes was chased by his own dogs, fell into a lake and was then rescued by a crocodile (4). This legend was interpreted over time so that

later accounts often assign the death to dogs or crocodiles. However, modern historians avoid discussing details of Menes life because his mythical nature may not really reflect a true individual (3–5). Why then do modern physicians believe that Menes was the first victim of a wasp sting allergy?

In 1930 L.A. Waddell, an interpreter of hieroglyphs, wrote a book that included copious material on Menes (6). He saw Menes as a specific individual of great achievement. Menes exploits as documented in this book are Herculean and almost certainly were not achievable at that time. In Waddell's account Menes is said to have travelled very widely and had tremendous influences on many cultures. On one of these voyages (to the British Isles!) Waddell writes that Menes

Pharaoh Menes' death due to a wasp sting is thought to be the first reported anaphylactic reaction. We present the underlying original literature of the wasp sting tale, proving the story is an obscure fiction of one historian.



Figure 1. Detail from plate no. 1. The 'wasp' appears as a semi circle on the bottom left (6).



Figure 2. Detail from plate no. 2. The bottom of the plate is better preserved. Three 'wasps' are now seen (6).

died from the sting of a wasp or hornet. The author's evidence for this event uses hieroglyphs found on two almost identical but only partially preserved ebony plates at one of the many putative Menes burial sites. In contrast to other clearly perceivable animals, Waddell interprets a half circle hieroglyph on plate no. 1 as a wasp or a hornet, using plate no. 2 for completion (Figs 1 and 2). However, the 'sting' can only be seen on plate no. 1, giving the certainty to be only an accidental wooden scratch. Moreover, Waddell ignored the variation of the hieroglyphs on plate no. 2, where three 'wasps' are noticeable instead of one. Never again have historians followed Waddell's interpretation. In contrast, the 'wasps' are seen without doubt as hieroglyphic numbers (5).

Although Waddell's fictional account of Menes death after a wasp sting has never been accepted by other Egyptologists it has reverberated through the medical literature on allergy to this very day.

*Department of Anesthesia & Perioperative Care,
University of California San Francisco
San Francisco
CA
USA
E-mail: krombach@anesthesia.ucsf.edu

Accepted for publication 8 March 2004
Allergy 2004; 59:1234–1235
Copyright © Blackwell Munksgaard 2004
DOI: 10.1111/j.1398-9995.2004.00603.x

References

1. RING J, BEHRENDT H. Anaphylaxis and anaphylactoid reactions. *Clin Rev Allergy Immunol* 1999;**17**:387–399.
2. WASSERMANN SI. The allergist in the new millenium. *J Allergy Clin Immunol* 2000;**105**:3–8.
3. REDFORD DB (ed.) *The Oxford encyclopedia of ancient Egypt*, Vol 2, p.377. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
4. MORENZ S. Traditionen um Menes. *Zeitschrift fuer Ägyptische Sprache (ZÄS)* 1972;**99**:X–XVI.
5. EMERY WB. *Archaic Egypt*. pp.38–52. Baltimore: Edition Penguin Book, 1961.
6. WADELL LA. *Egyptian civilization it's sumerian original & real chronology*, pp.60–63. London: Luzac & Co, 1930.

The frequency of mouse and rat allergy among allergic individuals in İzmir (a preliminary report)

K. Onbaşı*, Ö. Ardeniz, A. Z. Sin, A. Kokuludağ, F. Sebik

Key words: allergic asthma; allergic rhinitis; inner-city allergens; mouse allergens; rat allergens.

Mouse/rat sensitivity is observed among atopic patients in İzmir city.

Mouse and rat epithelia and dander are important indoor allergens, especially among individuals living in cities. Studies especially in laboratory personnel and several other patient groups revealed that exposure to these allergens may lead to allergic rhinitis and/or allergic asthma. Dust samples from asthmatic patients' homes showed that mouse and rat allergens may be found at high concentrations like the other indoor allergens (cockroach, cat, dog, dust mite) as mentioned in the literature (1, 2). These data suggests that rat and mouse allergens should be sought as

important indoor allergens (3). Mouse allergens (Mus m I) and rat allergen (Rat n 1) can be found in a widely distribution in the air, even in rooms that do not contain mice in mouse breeding facilities. Occupational allergy to mice is a major cause of disability among workers in mouse breeding and research facilities (4). Realizing how potent these allergens could be in occupational settings led the investigators to study their distribution and clinical significance in the homes of inner-city patients with asthma. Our aim was to determine the frequency of rat and mouse allergy among allergic individuals in İzmir.

Eighty-three patients attending our allergy polyclinic consecutively in July and August 2003 were detected for mouse and rat allergy with prick method (Stallergens and Allergopharma). These allergic rhinitis/asthma patients had a mean age of 31.59 ± 11.16 years. Three patients were found to be allergic to mouse (3.6%), three patients were found to be allergic to rat (3.6%). Eight patients (9.6%) had mouse and rat sensitivity concomitantly. A total of 16 patients (16.9%) had mouse/rat/mouse + rat sensitivity (Fig. 1).

Mouse and rat allergens are well documented causes of immunoglobulin-E mediated hypersensitivity. Mouse

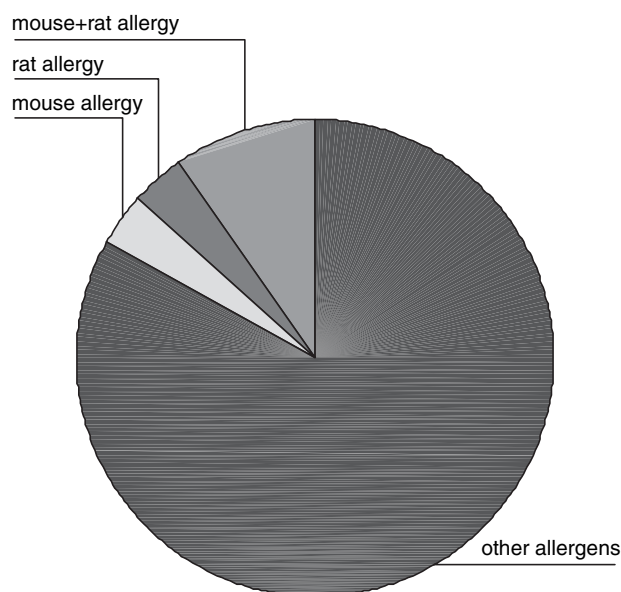


Figure 1. Mouse and rat sensitization distribution.