



The Heart In History

Throughout history, the heart has been recognised as an important part of the human body. From the Ancient Egyptian Book of Death through to the Ancient Greeks and right up to today, scientists and philosophers have linked the heart to a whole range of human emotions.

The Weighing Of The Heart

The Egyptians were no strangers to removing organs once somebody had died, but they believed the heart to be the seat of a person's soul and so it was left inside the body. They believed that it could tell a person's true character and had a vital role to play on their way to the afterlife. In their Book of Death, the Ancient Egyptians had "spells" (which were much like chapters in a book today) that discussed things that happened to a soul in the afterlife. Spells 30 and 125 described the weighing of the heart rite. In it, the heart of the deceased was placed on an enormous set of scales and weighed against a feather from the goddess, Maat. She was said to personify order and truth. If the heart weighed more than the feather, or the god Anubis declared it to be impure, then it was immediately eaten by the monster Ammit. To help with the ceremony, Ancient Egyptians were often buried with models of scarab beetles engraved with the words from Spell 30.

A Heart Is For Thinking

Much like the Ancient Egyptians, the Ancient Greeks thought that the heart was the area where a person's personality lived. Many Greek philosophers idolised the Egyptians and their ideas, so it's no surprise that they had similar thoughts about the body. Aristotle took these ideas even further. During his life (he died in 323 BCE), he believed that the heart acted like we now know the brain does and was responsible for thought and personality. He believed that the brain was just a giant radiator whose only function was to cool the blood as it passed through it. It's easy to see why he would have thought this: the heart is a lot more active to look at than the brain. He believed that this meant that more complex creatures produced more heat than simple ones such as insects. The fact that we had large brains was obvious to him: our great intellect meant that we needed a bigger "radiator" to cool it down. Ideas like this are why we still associate the heart with emotions such as love and describe somebody as broken-hearted.



A Small-Hearted Hero

Having a big heart hasn't always been seen as a good thing. Old Norse tribes, such as the Danes and the Goths, believed that brave warriors had much smaller, colder hearts than normal men. It is unsure why they believed this. It might be because they believed a coward's heart would quiver and jump about nervously. They thought that this was only possible with a big heart.

Heart Burial

The common belief that the heart controlled the emotions, thoughts and reasoning led to some strange customs during the middle ages. Having your heart buried separately to the rest of your body was quite common. When warriors died during the Crusades, they fell in places that were far from home. The heart and the inner organs were then removed and sent back to loved ones in small boxes filled with spices and flowers. In later centuries, it became common for important figures, such as kings and queens, to ask that their hearts be buried in their favourite spot! Richard the Lion Heart, Robert the Bruce and Anne Boleyn all had their hearts buried in a separate place to their body.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Which culture believed that the heart was weighed after death?
2. What did the heart need to be lighter than?
3. Who thought that the brain cooled the blood down?
4. Who commonly asked for their heart to be buried separately to their body?
5. Which type of heart was said to jump around?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

Which word means closest to "looked up to or worshiped them"?

S

Why was it not surprising that the Ancient Greeks believed a lots of the same things as the Ancient Egyptians?

S

Why do we still use language that links the heart to emotions?

V

Find and copy a word from the text that means to shake and wobble.

I

Choose one group of people from the text and explain how you know they thought the heart was important.

Answers:

1. The Ancient Egyptians
2. The feather of Maat
3. Aristotle
4. Important people/kings and queens
5. A coward's heart

V: Idolised

S: They thought that the Egyptians knew everything

S: For a long time, people thought that the heart was the seat of the emotions and the soul.

V: Quiver

I: Accept answers that show how the heart was treated differently or how their opinion shows they thought the heart was special.

I.e. The Ancient Greeks thought that the heart was important because they thought that all thinking and the person's soul came from the heart.