

The Rat King

A look at the entanglement of lives and deaths



„Rat King“ specimen in alcohol, seven house rats (*Rattus rattus*) found in Rüdershausen on the 27th of January 1907

From the Zoological Institute collection of the University Goettingen

What at first may look like a family of peacefully sleeping rats, on closer inspection reveals itself to be a fascinating secret, a story about the entanglement of rats and humans, live and death.

The “Rat King” does not origin from a fable or children’s story as the name might suggest, but instead describes of a group of house rats (*Rattus rattus*), stuck together by a ball of seemingly inseparably knotted tails. These knots appear in overpopulated nests, often between siblings in the third and fourth week of life, when their tails are still soft and flexible and undergo strong growth. Dirt, excrements, frost, and food scraps together with the rat tails strong grip reflex lead to the permanent connection of the rats.

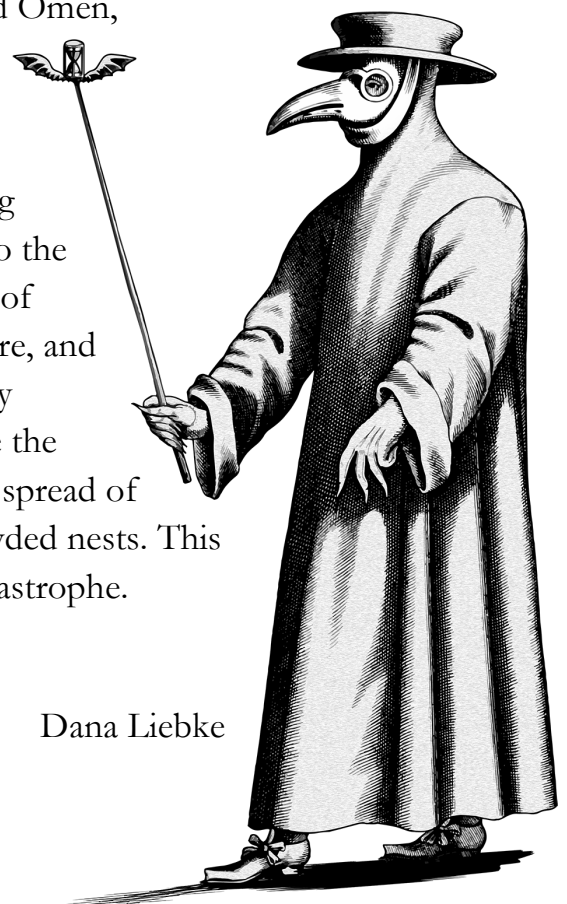
If these young rats are entangled, they can still survive sometime after their mothers stop suckling them because they are still being delivered food by their families. There have been discoveries of Rat Kings also comprising of larger, older animals that had calluses on their tails and where the tails stick together, they are often broken by the animals trying to free themselves. The largest Rat King ever found comprises of 32 mummified rats and is stored at Altenberg, Turingia.

But these animal “Kings” are not only found in rats, they have also been observed in other rodents, like squirrels. Still, some scientists are of the opinion, that they cannot be the product of natural processes, but are actually the outcome of human manipulation.

Discoveries of a Rat King were always rare, even rare enough that the discovery of a Rat King at the end of the 17th century in Straßburg was distributed in the city via leaflet. Still, since the 18th century the numbers have shrunk even further. This is due to the house rat, *Rattus rattus* being displaced by the more durable Norway rat, *Rattus norvegicus*. Still, newer Rat king specimens are documented better, like the youngest, which was found in 2005 in Estonia.

Our Rat King was found in Rüdershausen near the city of Göttingen on the 27th of January 1907 by the timber salesman Degenhard, who heard some noises coming from his barn and upon further inspection found one, then two, then three, finally 10 entangled young rats — seven of whom can still be seen today, in the Zoological Institute of the University of Göttingen.

In the past, the Rat King was considered to be a bad Omen, something poisonous, a harbinger of sickness and disease, announcing the coming of Gods punishment for humanities sins in the form of catastrophes. While most believes about the Rat king can be treated as mere superstition, its connection to the spread of the bubonic plague, that killed nearly half of Europe’s population, rings true even today. Rats were, and still are, the hosts of rat flea that can carry the deadly bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, the Black Death. And while the plagues true source was still unknown at the time, a spread of the plague between rats was more likely in overcrowded nests. This lends some truth to the Rat King as a symbol of catastrophe.



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Sources:

Article „Rattenkönig“ by Sandra Maus

Picture courtesy of the University Museum of Göttingen