Early descriptions of cluster headache

Priority for description of cluster headache or periodic migrainous neuralgia is a source of polemic. Much depends upon the stringency of criteria applied. Hierons1 refers to Thomas Willis (1621–1675) who described a venerable matron who began to suffer every afternoon at 4 o’clock from recurring severe headache.

In 1747 Joannes Christoph Ulricus Oppermann published his little acknowledged Dissertatio Medica Inauguralis, entitled Hemicrania Horologica which may be the first account2 of the variant, chronic paroxysmal hemicrania, to which I will refer in a later piece.

Benjamin Hutchinson’s description of “neuralgia spasmodica” is often cited as the original account of cluster headache: with attacks every 24 hours, but lasting for several hours. The nature of these attacks is dubious, and some were probably tic douloureux.

Romberg in his classic Manual3 records: painful sensations in the eye, confined to one side and excited by rays of light and visual effort . . . The pupil is contracted. The eye generally weeps and becomes red. These symptoms occur in paroxysms, of a uniform and irregular character, and isolated or combined with facial neuralgia and hemicrania. Romberg’s emphasis on the photophobia4 is incongruous with current concepts, but he was clearly observing a condition closely akin to cluster headache.

References

2 Oppermann, Joannes Christoph Ulricus. Dissertatio Medica Inauguralis, “Hemicrania Horologica” pro gradu doctoris, 1747.