



Winter 2022

Tattooing Antiquity, Symbolism, and Practice in Early Cultures

Kate Hawken

Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/anthropology_scholarsweek



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hawken, Kate, "Tattooing Antiquity, Symbolism, and Practice in Early Cultures" (2022). *Anthropology Department Scholars Week*. 6.

https://cedar.wwu.edu/anthropology_scholarsweek/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Department Scholars Week by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Kate Hawken
ANTH 490-Final Paper
Winter 2022

Tattooing Antiquity, Symbolism, and Practice in Early Cultures

Key words: Ötzi, Egypt, Mesopotamia, mummy, therapeutic

Abstract

As one of the most permanent markings of culture etched into human skin, tattooing provides a unique view into the beliefs and practices of the human species. Tattooing has existed throughout human history, but it can be difficult to establish its true purpose and antiquity within early cultures. This is due in part to biological degradation and misclassification of the material implements of tattooing, as well as the scarcity of tattooed physical human remains. Archeological context and the identification of possible material artifacts associated with tattooing, along with the examination (or re-examination) of physical human remains for evidence of tattooing, will help place tattooing's presence and purpose within a historical context. For this paper, I reviewed ten scientific journal articles on the subject of tattooing within early cultures. Current investigations into the proposed purposes of early tattoos focus on iconographic and symbolic use, as well as cross-cultural therapeutic application. Tattoos, as instruments that transmit culture, can provide new insights into ancient societies and thereby reveal new avenues for exploring the visual language of Paleolithic times.

Introduction

Tattooing has been practiced by many ancient cultures throughout human history and for seemingly many different reasons (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Krutak, 2015; Tassie, 2003). It is an area of study that provides a unique look into the world view of those cultures and their mythos, social constructs, and ideas of self-determination (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Krutak, 2015; Tassie, 2003). Evidence for tattooing exists as iconographic depictions and identifiable tattoo implements, with the most easily identifiable and defensible being preserved tattooed human remains (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Friedman, 2018). There is evidence of tattooing in ancient and pre-literate societies in the form of figurative art displaying tattoo-like markings and what could be tattoo tools ranging as far back as the Upper Paleolithic (Deter-Wolf, 2016). The most irrefutable evidence of tattooing is undoubtedly preserved human skin (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Friedman, 2018). Tattooing in these early cultures remains a question for anthropologists and archeologists and is an area of study which has not receive much attention until relatively recently (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003).

Iconographic Depictions of Tattooing

Artistic depictions of possible tattoos have been found throughout the ancient world in the form of incised or painted ornamentation on human shaped figurines, rock art, ceramic vessels and bone (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003; VanStone, 1974). While not definitive evidence of tattooing, isolated decorative patterns on figurines are the most suggestive examples

of real-life tattooing (Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Patterns of lines and dots on female Egyptian Predynastic figurines dating to around 6022 BP are reminiscent of tattoo patterns found on preserved mummies from slightly later periods (Tassie, 2003). An Ipiutak Pendant from Deering Alaska is a good example of iconographic tattooing being an incised male face carved from antler (VanStone, 1974). A rare example of Inuit realistic portraiture dated to 2361 BP, it depicts facial carvings strikingly similar to what is seen in modern Inuit facial tattooing (VanStone, 1974). These iconographic representations provide a possible framework for understanding the cultural significance of body decoration and tattooing, but a better marker for tattooing is the actual implements required to create tattoos (Deter-Wolf, 2010)

Tattooing Methods and Tools

While a clearer testament for tattooing than possible iconographic representations, tattoo implements are still a rare find (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003). One of the impediments to establishing the true antiquity of tattooing is the relative lack of archaeologically identifiable tattoo implements (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003). There are actually few positive archaeological identifications of tattoo implements outside of Oceania and those exist mainly due to its prolific and enduring indigenous tattoo tradition (Deter-Wolf, 2010). The lack of convincing evidence in other regions is in large part due to preservation issues and archeological bias (Deter-Wolf, 2010). Tools used to insert pigment into the skin of humans are typically categorized as “needles” and are sorted into three major stylistic groups; skin stitching tools, perpendicularly hafted instruments, and in-line needles (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003). Skin stitching uses a small needle and pigment dyed thread to sew tattoo designs into skin, hafted instruments use single or grouped points perpendicularly hafted to a main handle to drive pigment into the dermal layer, and in-line needles are unhafted or longitudinally hafted arrangements of singular or bundled needles (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003). In-line needles categorization also includes blades, lithic flakes, and similar implements used to incise the skin which is then smeared with pigment (Deter-Wolf, 2010). The very nature of these hafted and unhafted needle-like tools present a problem for the archeological record in that they appear in numerous other contexts and can easily be ascribed to a variety of functions, such as awl, blade, sewing needle, and/or point (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Environmental degradation combined with the organic nature of many of the components associated with tattoo implements add to issues in assigning usage to these potential tools (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003).

Victorian sensibilities of early archeologists as well as archeological bias in regards to the stigma of tattoo are also largely to blame for the oversight of tattooing as a viable category to which to assign questionable implements (Deter-Wolf, 2010). Interestingly, what few implements to have been found and accredited to tattooing from Ancient Egypt consist of bundled rods, in which the bundled rods match ethnographic evidence of Egyptian number symbolism, thus providing compelling evidence of their use as tattoo implements (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003). Deter-Wolf (2010) and Tassie (2003) state that the strongest indicator that an implement was used for tattooing is pigment and/or blood residue adhering to the tip. Unfortunately, blood and pigment residue are not guaranteed to survive due to environmental and preservation factors (Deter-Wolf,

2010; Tassie, 2003). This potential biological degradation combined with the expense and time necessary to conduct residue analysis of all potential tattoo implements, makes this indicator largely unhelpful in assigning classifications (Deter-Wolf, 2010). The best workaround seems to be identifying possible tattoo implements by way of establishing context (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Tassie, 2003).

During Saint-Just and Marthe Pequart's 1937-1943 excavation of the Mas d'Azil site in southern France they recovered a suite of artifacts that they classified as a tattoo kit (Deter-Wolf, 2010). Consisting of ochre, implements with which to grind and prepare it, as well as bi-pointed needles and awls, this kit was seen as providing strong contextual evidence for tattooing within the archeological record (Deter-Wolf, 2010). Ethnographic evidence from traditional tattooing cultures suggest that tattoo needles do not travel as individual items but as a part of a larger tool kit containing not only the functional items needed for tattooing but also culturally symbolic paraphernalia specific to individual cultures (Deter-Wolf, 2010). This last component might be the hardest to assign universal parameters to but could consist of musical instruments, feathers, beads, shells, or medicinal accoutrements of some sort, anything that could provide ritualistic and/or symbolic significance (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Lately there has been more scholarly interest in ancient tattooing practices, although the focus is still mostly on preserved human remains, iconographic elements, and social/ritual importance (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Some effort has been made to identify tattoo implements in archeological collections but these attempts are still rare and there is little agreement amongst professionals as to what allows for a definitive classification (Deter-Wolf, 2010).

Human Remains

Direct evidence of tattooing remains naturally and deliberately preserved human skin (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Friedman, 2018). The oldest archeological proof of the antiquity of tattooing has long been thought to be the Tyrolean Iceman Ötzi, dated to 6272 BP and seen as the world's oldest preserved tattooed human remains (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Krutak, 2015). Discovered accidentally in 1991 in the Tyrolean Alps, Ötzi has 61 tattoo marks on his body consisting of groupings of various length lines ranging from one to three mm in thickness and seven to forty mm in length (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). Most of these tattoos are located on his lower legs, lower back, and torso and don't appear to represent any identifiable form (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). Long thought to be the oldest, he is not the only ancient tattooed mummified human remains to have been discovered (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Ditchey, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Friedman, 2018; Krutak, 2015; Tassie, 2003).

There have been mummified tattooed human remains found throughout much of the world (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Krutak, 2015; Tassie, 2003). One such place is Egypt, where until recently the oldest tattooed remains found dated to approximately 4062 BP (Ditchey, 2016; Tassie, 2003). While figurative and iconographic evidence of tattooing exists from approximately 6022 BP no physical proof from that early era had been discovered until just recently (Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Seven naturally occurring mummies from the British Museum's Egyptian mummy catalog were re-examined for signs of body modification as part of a newly implemented conservation program (Friedman, 2018). Tattoos were found on one

female and one male from the Gebelein site in Upper Egypt dating to approximately 6000BP, putting them right around the same age as Ötzi (Friedman, 2018). The other five mummies did not show evidence of tattoos but it must be acknowledged that their tightly constricted body positioning and physical state were not conducive to exhaustive examination and the possibility of tattooing remains (Friedman, 2018).

The newly discovered tattooed remains from Gebelein show distinctive figurative tattoos that mirror motifs found in Predynastic (c. 7500-5300 BP) art (Friedman, 2018). Although not noticeable under normal conditions, infrared imaging shows that the male has what appears to be two horned animals on his upper right arm (Friedman, 2018). Infrared examination of the female body provides evidence of four small 'S' shaped motifs running vertically over her right shoulder, below which is a linear motif (Friedman, 2018). There is also evidence of an irregular dark line that runs horizontally across her lower abdomen but due to the contracted positioning of the body it is not possible to investigate further without causing damage (Friedman, 2018). Upon examination many of these tattoos have been associated with symbolic meaning (Friedman, 2018).

Symbolic Meaning Associated with Tattoos

Horned animals are a popular motif in Predynastic art and play an important role in ancient Egyptian imagery as a symbol of male power and virility, often appearing on carved ivories, incised potmarks, and rock art (Friedman, 2018). The female's tattoos are more difficult to interpret but may be a depiction of the crooked staves that symbolize power and status and which are always presented in multiples on decorated Predynastic pottery (Friedman, 2018). CT scans of these mummies do not reveal any underlying conditions near or below the tattoos, suggesting that unlike the possible therapeutic motivation of some of Ötzi's 61 tattoos, these have a more symbolic/mystical meaning (Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003).

The Gebelein mummies not only provides evidence of earlier tattooing in Egypt than previous finds, but also challenge conventional thought and circumstantial evidence that Egyptian tattooing was almost exclusively female related (Friedman, 2018). Previously documented physical evidence of tattooing consisted of specific groupings of dots found only on female remains (Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Egyptians, both ancient and modern, ascribe special symbolic meaning to certain numbers (Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Due to the placement of many of these early tattoos being on female lower abdomens, combined with number symbolism still practiced today, a prevailing theory has been that these tattoos were primarily related to protection during childbirth as well as being associated with eroticism/prostitution and the goddess Hathor (Ditchey, 2016; Fieldman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). While the Gebelein mummies also show evidence of number symbolism in their repetitive patterning, they are most definitely figurative in design and easily identifiable with other figurative art mediums employed by Egyptians throughout an extended time period (Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003).

Around roughly the same period in Ancient Mesopotamia evidence of tattooing is found almost exclusively in text form (Ditchey, 2016). Unlike in Egypt where tattooing appears to be symbolic

and protective in practice, textual evidence of tattooing in Ancient Mesopotamia is almost universally punitive in nature (Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Early examples of cuneiform writing are principally economic (Ditchey, 2016). Cuneiform tablets from the fourth millennium c. 5522-4362 BP in Mesopotamia list tattooed slaves and animals owned by temple households (Ditchey, 2016). Specifically, tattooing was used to mark slaves and temple dependents and to punitively identify runaway or insubordinate slaves (Ditchey, 2016). This practice of ownership marking appeared to be so widespread that a recurring theme is the tendency to note when an owned person was *not* marked (Ditchey, 2016).

Although there is less documented evidence of textual tattooing from Mesopotamia's second millennium (c. 4022-3023 BP), the Babylonian lexical text *ana ittisu* describes the punishment of a runaway slave in such a way that it has received attention due to the parallels it draws in neighboring cultures at a much later date (Ditchey, 2016). The slave's owner shackled him in chains and "Runaway! Seize!" was engraved on his face (Ditchey, 2016). The practice of ownership identification spread as the ancient world became more economically diverse and the slave trade proliferated with the Greeks and Romans adopting the convention of marking slaves and prisoners of war many centuries later (Ditchey, 2016; Fisher, 2002).

Textual evidence from pre-modern China also references the stigma and social ostracism related to tattooed individuals (Reed, 2000). By the Eighth Century BCE tattooing within the Near East became an internationally recognized sign of servitude that could be written in many languages, often resulting in slaves who were marked in multiple languages thus denoting far-reaching trade (Ditchey, 2016). Ditchey (2016) and Fisher (2002) assert that the Greek word *stigmata* actually indicates tattooing and that the word was then transmitted to the Romans which raises interesting biblical implications. This stigma persists in modern culture and according to Ditchey (2016), Fisher (2002), and Friedman (2018) helps to explain why archaeological bias contributed to theories that ancient Egyptian tattooing was associated with female eroticism and prostitution. Egyptian females of high rank continued to voluntarily tattoo themselves for centuries (Ditchey, 2016). Regardless, during Ramses III's reign (approximately 3208-3177 BP) Egyptian depictions of prisoners of war tattooed with Ramses' name appear on a relief in the temple at Medinet Habu (Ditchey, 2016). Not all tattoos found on human remains have clear symbolic meaning, some are thought to have a more therapeutic value (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015).

Therapeutic Value of Tattooing

Upon examination of the placement and obviously non-ornamental design of Ötzi's tattoos, it is theorized that they held therapeutic instead of symbolic value (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). Radiological studies show that Ötzi had arthrosis in the hip, knee, and ankle joints, as well as in the lumbar spine (Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). Assessment from acupuncture specialists indicate that eighty percent of his tattoos are located directly on or to within a tiny margin of classical acupuncture points used to treat these types of rheumatic afflictions (Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). Dorfer (1999) and Krutak (2015) theorize that these tattoos were part of a more holistic medicinal practice as some of the markings on Ötzi's back are positioned on acupuncture meridians known to treat stomach ailments, this theory is corroborated by the abundance of charcoal and whipworm eggs found in Ötzi's colon (Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015).

Oral doses of charcoal are used to this day to treat stomach disorders (Dorfer, 1999). Krutak (2015) proposes that these tattoo treatments were repeated over time due to the extreme darkness of several, pointing to multiple applications at the same site.

Examination of a reconstructed 2500-year-old mummy from the Pazyryk culture of Siberia also shows strong evidence of therapeutic tattooing (Krutak, 2015). The Pazyryk mummy has several dot-shaped tattoos on either side of its lumbar spine and on its right ankle, both locations are related to classical acupuncture points for issues relating to those specific regions and closely parallel those seen on Ötzi (Krutak, 2015). In 1992 a mummy was discovered in southern Peru covered in obviously ornamental tattoos depicting stylized apes, birds, and reptiles but at the base of its neck and upper back are tattooed small circular shapes displaying none of the detail or ornamentation of the rest (Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). Dorfer (1999) and Krutak (2015) both opine that the difference between the two tattoo styles is so obvious that it immediately suggests a therapeutic as opposed to decorative/spiritual purpose for those few tattoos. Unfortunately, evidence shows no radiological examination of these mummies. Contemporary therapeutic tattoos found in Asia and Africa are extremely similar in design to Ötzi's (Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). These findings provide strong evidence that a form of therapy utilizing tattoo was in practice during Ötzi's timeframe (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015).

Conclusion

Historical and archeological evidence of tattooing shows that it was practiced across the ancient world (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Ditchey, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Fisher, 2002; Friedman, 2018; Krutak, 2015; Reed, 2000; Tassie, 2003). Conclusive proof of the antiquity of tattooing has yet to be uncovered but it is impossible to ignore the symbolic and therapeutic nature of its use in early and modern cultures (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). This is a relatively new branch of study and while tattooed human remains and textual evidence provide obvious examples of tattooing, there is also a need to re-examine artifact collections as well as physical remains in regards to their links to tattooing (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Friedman, 2015; Tassie, 2003). The limited number of tattooing implements within the archaeological record present a problem when trying to tie tattooing to early cultures (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). Context may be as important as form when identifying tattooing implements (Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003). The discovery of more material implements, as well as their accompanying tool kit, will be helpful in not only identifying tattooing within specific cultures, but it will build a better understanding of the values and traditions of those culture (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Friedman, 2018; Tassie, 2003) The imagery of ancient tattooing also reveals information about the person being tattooed and their role within their society (Deter-Wolf, 2010).

Tattooing's therapeutic implications are hard to ignore given its close link to modern acupuncture and the fact that those tattoos identified as possibly therapeutic are not randomly selected points but rather corresponding groups of point representing a meaningful and recognizable therapeutic regimen (Dorfer, 1999). The cultural insights to be gained regarding symbolism and ritual through a more in-depth study of tattooing will lead to a greater understanding of early peoples and their world-views regarding the spiritual and mystical (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Reed, 2000; Tassie, 2003).

Overall, we know that tattooing was a global practice throughout the ancient world, revealing social, political, religious, and economic information about both the cultures and the individuals where it took place (Deter-Wolf, 2010; Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Reed, 2000; Tassie, 2003). The specific placement of tattoos can also provide understanding and insights into ancient therapeutic practices and early medicine (Deter-Wolf, 2010, 2016; Dorfer, 1999; Krutak, 2015). The study of early tattooing is a vital building block for understanding early human culture (Deter-Wolf, 2010). Further research including new archeological finds, re-examination of existing collections, as well as advancements in dating and imaging methods will provide more insight and a greater understanding of the antiquity and meaning associated to tattoos and thus greater insight of what it means to be human (Deter-Wolf, 2016; Ditchey, 2016; Friedman, 2018; Krutak, 2015; Tassie, 2003).

References

- Deter-Wolf, Aaron. "The material culture and middle stone age origins of ancient tattooing." In *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity. Proceedings of the sessions at the EAA annual meetings in The Hague and Oslo*, vol. 11 (2010): 15-26.
- Deter-Wolf, Aaron, Benoît Robitaille, Lars Krutak, and Sébastien Galliot. "The world's oldest tattoos." *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 5 (2016): 19-24.
- Dorfer, Leopold, Maximilian Moser, Frank Bahr, Konrad Spindler, Eduard Egarter-Vigl, Sonia Guillén, Gottfried Dohr, and Thomas Kenner. "A medical report from the stone age?." *The Lancet* 354, no. 9183 (1999): 1023-1025.
- Ditchey, Mallory. "Body language: tattooing and branding in ancient Mesopotamia." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1-24.
- Fisher, Jill A. "Tattooing the body, marking culture." *Body & Society* 8, no. 4 (2002): 91-107.
- Friedman, Renée, Daniel Antoine, Sahra Talamo, Paula J. Reimer, John H. Taylor, Barbara Wills, and Marcello A. Mannino. "Natural mummies from Predynastic Egypt reveal the world's earliest figural tattoos." *Journal of Archaeological Science* 92 (2018): 116-125.
- Krutak, Lars. "The cultural heritage of tattooing: a brief history." In *Tattooed skin and health*, vol. 48 (2015): 1-5.
- Reed, Carrie E. "Tattoo in early China." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (2000): 360-376.
- Tassie, Geoffrey. "Identifying the practice of tattooing in ancient Egypt and Nubia." *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 14 (2003).
- VanStone, James W., and Charles V. Lucier. "An early archaeological example of tattooing from Northwestern Alaska." *Fieldiana. Anthropology* 66, no. 1 (1974): 1-9.

