

Tattoo History : Tattooed Mummies

Contributed by WaterTattoos.Net
 Wednesday, 02 July 2008
 Last Updated Wednesday, 02 July 2008

In October 1991 a five thousand year old tattooed man made the headlines of newspapers all over the world when his frozen body was discovered on a mountain between Austria and Italy. He had apparently been hunting and was caught in a snow storm as he tried to return home. Together with the body were clothing, a bow and arrows, a bronze ax, and flint for making fire.

"I don't like superlatives," said Professor Konrad Spindler of Innsbruck University, "but this is the only body of a Bronze Age man found in a glacier and certainly the best preserved corpse of that period ever found. Other Bronze Age corpses found in German, Scandinavian, or British peat moors didn't have much of the inner organs and skin left intact."

The skin is of great interest because it bears several tattoos: a cross on the inside of the left knee, and six straight lines 15 centimeters long above the kidneys. Spindler speculated that the tattooing could have been ornamental, or that it might have been used for magical purposes or to denote social status.

Tattooed mummies have been found in many other parts of the world. One of the best preserved of these mummies is Amunet, who in life was a priestess of the goddess Hathor at Thebes during Dynasty XI (2160-1994 BC). As principal representative of all other Egyptian goddesses, Hathor symbolized the cosmic mother who gave birth to all life on earth. Throughout Egypt temples were erected and festivals were held in her honor. The most important of these was the festival celebrating her birth, a drunken orgy which was held on New Year's Day. Amunet's mummy is well preserved and the tattooing can be clearly seen. Parallel lines are tattooed on her arms and thighs, and there is an elliptical pattern below her navel. According to Egyptian scholar Robert S. Bianchi, the tattooing has "an undeniably carnal overtone."

Statuettes decorated with designs like those found on Amunet and other mummies have been discovered in many Egyptian tombs. Egyptologists believe that these designs are symbols of fertility and rejuvenation. The statuettes, called "brides of the dead," were buried with male mummies and were supposed to arouse the sexual instincts of the deceased and to ensure his resurrection.

All of the tattooed Egyptian mummies discovered to date are female. Can we conclude that in ancient Egypt only females were tattooed? Probably not. Designs which apparently represent tattoos are seen on paintings of both men and women in Egyptian art, and statues of Egyptian kings who reigned toward the end of the New Kingdom are engraved with hieroglyphs and images of Egyptian gods which probably represent tattooing.

There is no known word for tattooing in ancient Egyptian. However, a line in the papyrus Bremer-Rhind reads: "Their name is inscribed into their arms as Isis and Nephthys..." The hieroglyph *mentenu* which is here translated as "inscribed" has a very general meaning which may also be translated as "etched" or "engraved". This may be a reference to tattooing. However, one female Egyptian mummy has both tattoos and ornamental scars, so *mentenu* may also refer to scarring, branding, or cutting a design with a knife.

In Libya, both male and female tattooed mummies have been discovered. Some male mummies bear tattooed images relating to sun worship, and other male mummies, discovered in the tomb of Seti I and dating from about 1300 BC were tattooed with pictographs symbolizing Neith, a fierce goddess who led warriors into battle. The earliest known tattoo which is a picture of something, rather than an abstract pattern, represents the god Bes. In Egyptian mythology Bes is the lascivious god of revelry. In addition to his duties as master of ceremonies at orgies, Bes served as the patron god of dancing girls and musicians. Bes is portrayed in many Egyptian works of art as an ugly ape-like dwarf wearing an animal skin. This image is found on steles and vases, while on amulets he is often represented as a phallus. When hung at the head of a bed, these amulets were supposed to ward off evil spirits. Bes's image appears as a tattoo on the thighs of dancers and musicians in many Egyptian paintings, and Bes tattoos have been found on female Nubian mummies dating from about 400 BC.

Tattooing on body of frozen Pazyryk Chief
 (After Rudenko, 1970)

Tattooed mummies have also been discovered in South America. In 1920 archaeologists in Peru unearthed tattooed Inca mummies dating from the Eleventh Century AD. In the absence of written records, little is known of the significance of this tattooing within the culture of the Incas, but the elaborate nature of the designs suggests that Inca tattooing underwent a long period of development during the pre-Inca period. In 1948 the Russian anthropologist Sergei Ivanovich Rudenko discovered an elaborately tattooed mummy when he was supervising the excavation of a group of Pazyryk tombs about 120 miles north of the border between China and Russia. The Pazyryks were formidable iron age horsemen and warriors who inhabited the steppes of Eastern Europe and Western Asia from the sixth through the second centuries BC. They left no written records, but Pazyryk artifacts demonstrate a sophisticated level of artistry and craftsmanship.

The Pazyryk tombs discovered by Rudenko were in an almost perfect state of preservation. They contained skeletons and intact bodies of horses and embalmed humans, together with a wealth of artifacts including saddles, riding gear, a carriage, rugs, clothing, jewelry, musical instruments, amulets, tools, and - interestingly - hash pipes! (described by Rudenko as "apparatus for inhaling hemp smoke"). Also found in the tombs were fabrics from Persia and China, which the Pazyryks must have obtained on journeys covering thousands of miles.

Rudenko's most remarkable discovery was the body of a tattooed Pazyryk chief: a thick-set, powerfully built man who had died when he was about 50. Parts of the body had deteriorated, but much of the tattooing was still clearly visible. The chief was elaborately decorated with an interlocking series of designs representing a variety of fantastic beasts.

The best preserved tattoos were a donkey, a mountain ram, two highly stylized deer with long antlers and an imaginary carnivore on the right arm. Two monsters resembling griffins decorate the chest, and on the left arm are three partially obliterated images which seem to represent two deer and a mountain goat.

On the front of the right leg a fish extends from the foot to the knee. A monster crawls over the right foot, and on the inside of the shin is a series of four running rams which touch each other to form a single design. The left leg also bears tattoos, but these designs could not be clearly distinguished. In addition, the chief's back is tattooed with a series of small circles in line with the vertebral column. This tattooing was probably done for therapeutic reasons. Contemporary Siberian tribesmen still practice tattooing of this kind to relieve back pain.

In the summer of 1993 another tattooed Pazyryk mummy was discovered in Siberia's Umok plateau. It had been buried over 2,400 years ago in a casket fashioned from the hollowed-out trunk of a larch tree. On the outside of the casket were stylized images of deer and snow leopards carved in leather. Shortly after burial the grave had apparently been flooded by freezing rain and the entire contents of the burial chamber had remained frozen in permafrost.

The body was that of a young woman whose arms had been tattooed with designs representing mythical creatures similar to those on the previously discovered Pazyryk mummy. She was clad in a voluminous white silk dress, a long crimson woolen skirt and white felt stockings. On her head was an elaborate headdress made of hair and felt - the first of its kind ever found intact. Also discovered in the burial chamber was a variety of artifacts among which were gilded ornaments, dishes, a brush, a pot containing marijuana, and a hand mirror of polished metal on the wooden back of which was a carving of a deer. Six horses wearing elaborate harnesses had been sacrificed and lay on the logs which formed the roof of the burial chamber.

"We wouldn't be as happy if we had found solid gold," said Natalya Polosmak, the Russian archaeologist who discovered the tomb. "These are everyday things. Through them we see life as it was."

Tattooing is mentioned by a remarkable number of Greek and Roman writers including Herodotus, Plutarch, Plato, Galen, Seneca, Petronius, Aristophanes, Dioscorides, Pliny the Elder, and a host of others. Respectable Greeks and Romans did not indulge in decorative tattooing, which they associated with barbarians. The Greeks, however, learned the technique from the Persians, and used it to mark slaves and criminals so they could be identified if they tried to escape. The Romans in turn adopted the practice from the Greeks, and in late antiquity when the Roman army consisted largely of mercenaries, they also were tattooed so that deserters could be identified.

The Latin word for "tattoo" was stigma, and the original meaning is reflected in modern dictionaries. Among the definitions of "stigma" listed by Webster are "a prick with a pointed instrument," ... "a distinguishing mark ... cut into the flesh of a slave or a criminal," and "a mark of disgrace or reproach."

The oldest known description of tattoo technique, together with a most remarkable formula for tattoo ink, is found in *Medicæ artis principes* by the sixth century Roman physician Aetius. He writes:

Stigmatae are the marks which are made on the face and other parts of the body. We see such marks on the hands of soldiers. To perform the operation they use ink made according to this formula: Egyptian pine wood (acacia) and especially the bark, one pound; corroded bronze, two ounces; gall, two ounces; vitriol, one ounce. Mix well and sift. Grind the corroded bronze with vinegar and mix it with the other ingredients to make a powder. Soak the powder in two parts of water and one part of leek juice and mix thoroughly. First wash the place to be tattooed with leek juice and then prick in the design with pointed needles until blood is drawn. Then rub in the ink. (Berchon, pp. 94-95. translated by SG)

Because of the disgrace associated with tattooing, Greek and Roman physicians did a brisk business in tattoo removal, and Aetius wisely anticipated the fact that many readers who had followed his directions would also be required to remove tattoos. He wrote:

In cases where we wish to remove such tattoos, we must use the following preparations ... [There follow two prescriptions, one involving lime or sypsum and sodium carbonate, the other pepper, rue and honey]. When applying, first clean the tattoos with nitre, smear them with resin of terebinth, and bandage for five days. On the sixth prick the tattoos with a pin, sponge away the blood, and then spread a little salt on the pricks, then after an interval of ten stadii [presumably the time taken to travel this distance], apply the aforesaid prescription and cover it with a linen bandage. Leave on for five days, and on the sixth smear on some of the prescription with a feather. The tattoos are removed in twenty days, without great ulceration and without a scar. (Jones, p. 143)

Aetius's prescription probably worked, as any corrosive preparation which causes infection and sloughing of the superficial layers of the skin will to some extent obliterate tattoo marks. Other Greek and Roman physicians had their own special formulas which must have done the job in some cases. Among the more remarkable prescriptions are: the scum on the bottom of a chamber pot mixed with "very strong vinegar" (Archigne, 97 AD); pigeon feces mixed with vinegar and applied as a poultice "for a long time" (Marcellus, 138 AD); Cantharides (popularly known as Spanish Fly - a dried beetle) mixed as a powder with sulfur, wax, and oil (Scribonius Largus 54 AD).

Tattooing as punishment is mentioned by many Greek and Roman authors. A few examples:

Plato thought that individuals guilty of sacrilege should be forcibly tattooed and banished from the Republic.

Suetone reports that the degenerate and sadistic Roman Emperor Caligula amused himself by capriciously ordering members of his court to be tattooed.

According to the historian Zonare, the Greek emperor Theophilus took revenge on two monks who had publicly criticized him by having eleven verses of obscene iambic pentameter tattooed on their foreheads!

Decorative tattooing in civilizations surrounding Greece and Rome was described by many ancient historians, and striking evidence of Thracian tattooing has been found by German Archaeologist Konrad Zimmerman in over 40 painted vases dating from the fifth century AD. According to Zimmerman, most of the paintings on these vases portray the death of Orpheus, who according to myth, was inconsolable after the death of his wife, Eurydice. He thereafter avoided women and turned his amorous attentions to young men, whom he hypnotized and seduced with his music. The jilted fiancées and wives of these young men took revenge by hacking Orpheus to pieces with a remarkable variety of instruments which Zimmerman has painstakingly identified in various vase paintings as shortswords, scythes, lances, double-bladed axes, skewers, pestles, and rocks. According to myth, Thracian women were tattooed to commemorate their victory over Orpheus, and we may speculate that these tattoos also served to remind Thracian husbands what fate awaited them if they proved unfaithful.

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, the tattooing of slaves and criminals was gradually abandoned. The Roman Emperor Constantine, who declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 325 AD, decreed that a man who had been condemned to fight as a gladiator or to work in the mines should be tattooed on the legs or the hands, but not on the face, "so that the face, which has been formed in the image of the divine beauty, should be defiled as little as possible."

The death of Orpheus. Greek vase painting, fifth century AD (after Zimmerman).

What can we conclude from this fragmentary evidence of tattooing in the ancient world? It is apparent that tattooing was widely practiced and in some cultures, at least, must have been associated with a high level of artistic endeavor. The imagery of ancient tattooing is in many ways similar to that of modern tattooing. Egyptian tattooing was related to the sensual, erotic, and emotional side of life, and all these themes are found in tattooing today. Inca tattooing is characterized by bold abstract patterns which resemble contemporary tribal tattoo designs. All of the known Pazyryk tattoos are images of animals. Animals are the most frequent subject matter of tattooing in many cultures and are traditionally associated with magic, totemism, and the desire of the tattooed person to become identified with the spirit of the animal. Thus it seems that tattooing in the ancient world had much in common with modern tattooing, and that tattooing the world over has profound and universal psychic origins.

The following selection is taken from *Remarques sur le Tatouage dans l'Egypte Ancienne* by Ludwig Keimer (*Memoires de l'Institut d'Egypte*. 1948, v. 53)

Although there is no proof that tattooing was practiced in Egypt during the Ancient Empire, we do have evidence that it was prevalent during the Middle Empire. Tattoos have been found on mummies of dancers and royal concubines who lived during the Middle Empire.

In the words of Locard: "Art critics and historians have systematically neglected one of the most interesting aspects of their discipline: the tattoo. It is the only form of art which has for its substratum living tissue, and is therefore the most noble art of all." In speaking of feminine fashions and amorous poetry of the ancient Egyptians the great Gaston Maspero has expressed somewhat the same idea: "It is almost a paradox to speak of fashion and feminine coquetry among the ancient Egyptians. But spend a quarter of an hour in our Cairo Museum and contemplate the mummies which are to be seen there. Observe the emaciated limbs, the wrinkled skin, the grimacing faces, and imagine that these were once living

beings who felt the same joys and sorrows which we feel, who dressed themselves with care and flirted with each other. Or consider such a mummy as that of Turin, a bundle of dried bones covered with shriveled brown skin, and with features contracted by embalming into a lamentable and grotesque expression, and imagine that this was once a young woman, delicate and elegant, whose subtle charm captivated the young gallants of Thebes..."

The first tattooed mummy which is known to us is that of Amunet, a priestess of the goddess Hathor. When the tomb of the priests of Amon of the 21st Dynasty was discovered in 1891, an excavation carried out by Grebaut in the valley of Der-el Bahri brought to light an intact tomb of the Eleventh Dynasty. In the funeral chamber there were two large rectangular wooden caskets bearing the name of Amunet, Priestess of Hathor, who was probably one of the royal concubines. One of these caskets contained a mummy in an excellent state of preservation. A study of the jewelry, which included necklaces, bracelets, and rings, will prove to be as interesting as a detailed anatomical examination of the body.

On the first of November 1938 Mr. M. G. Brunton, curator of the Cairo Museum, allowed me to examine the tattooing found on the mummy of Amunet. Because of the danger of damage to the mummy we did not turn it over, and it is for this reason that we were not able to see all of the tattoos.

As for the sketches which I made by direct observation of the mummy, they convey only an approximate idea of the tattooing rather than a literal representation. The photographs and the sketches prove in any case that the drawing made by Dr. Fouquet of the mummy in question is inexact and incomplete.

[There follows a detailed description of the tattoos, in which Keimer compares his observations with those of Dr. Fouquet, and corrects Dr. Fouquet's errors. Keimer then describes similar tattooing on two other female mummies dating from the same period, and quotes a letter from Professor D.E. Derry, who wrote:]

"Note on two Mummies of the Eleventh Dynasty from Deir el Bahary. "The graves containing these mummies were found by Mr. H.E. Winlock early in the year 1923 while excavating in the outer court of the Mentuhotep Temple at Deir el Bahary. They are remarkable in that both of them had been tattooed. Only one other example of a mummy exhibiting this ornamentation is known and this, a woman named Amunet from the same enclosure, is preserved in the Museum of Antiquities in Cairo. She was thought to have been a concubine of Mentuhotep II. The two women which are the subject of this note are believed to have been dancing girls attached to the court. "Besides the designs tattooed on the arms, legs, and dorsum of the feet, both of the women have the same design tattooed across the abdominal wall in the suprapubic region about the level of the anterior superior iliac spines.

"The object of the present note is to draw attention to a remarkable cicatrix which extends across the abdomen between the anterior superior spines just above the line of tattooing referred to in the last paragraph. The incision, however produced, whether by knife or cautery only affected the skin and did not invade the muscles of the abdominal wall, which are intact. It is evident that the wound healed slowly by granulation, as the line of union of the stretched and altered skin on either side of the cicatrix is very distinct and characteristic of this mode of healing. Sections taken by Dr. Aziz Girgis across the cicatrix and prepared by Ruffer's method to restore as far as possible the original condition of the tissues for the purpose of microscopical examination, showed very well the unbroken lines of the deeper structures of the wall of the abdomen and the thick connective tissue forming the scar. This was confirmed by Dr. Omar. The cicatrix is continued on both sides to the crest of the ilium which it crosses and terminates just below the highest point of the crest; over the upper part of the gluteal region in large leaf-shaped scars measuring in the case of no. 26 about 5.0 x 3.5 cm. In no. 23 the level of termination is slightly different on the two sides being just above the crest on the left side and just below on the right.

"The explanation of these incisions is perhaps to be found in the suggestion that those were dancing women and associated as the scars are with tattooing gives weight to this idea. Skin incisions are common among some of the tribes of the Sudan either as a curative measure when blood is drawn or purely as a decoration and in the latter case abdominal incisions particularly among women are common. In this connection it should be noted that no. 26 exhibits on the right side of the gluteal region a series of small scarifications such as are seen in many of the inhabitants both of Nubia and the Sudan on the face and other parts of the body. The Sudanese women who are thus decorated are either nude or wear only a short skirt which leaves the front of the abdomen exposed. The women which form the subject of this note probably danced without clothes of any sort." D.E. Derry