

World's earliest figural tattoos revealed

- British Museum research reveals tattoos on 5,000 year old natural mummies from Egypt, the oldest figural tattoos in the world.
- The earliest example of female tattooing in the world also revealed
- Tattoos of animals and motifs discovered using infrared photography
- Discoveries push back evidence for tattooing in Africa by a millennium.

The world's earliest figural tattoos have been revealed on two natural mummies in the British Museum's collection. Dating to between 3351 to 3017 BC (95.4% probability), figural tattoos of a wild bull and a Barbary sheep were identified on the upper arm of a male mummy and linear and S-shaped motifs have been identified on the upper arm and shoulder of a female mummy; the oldest tattoos ever found on a female body. The findings will be published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* on Thursday 1st March 2018. Entitled: Natural mummies from Predynastic Egypt reveal the world's earliest figural tattoos.

<https://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-archaeological-science/>

Daniel Antoine, one of the lead authors of the research paper and the British Museum's Curator of Physical Anthropology said 'The use of the latest scientific methods, including CT scanning, radiocarbon dating and infrared imaging, has transformed our understanding of the Gebelein mummies. Only now are we gaining new insights into the lives of these remarkably preserved individuals. Incredibly, at over five thousand years of age, they push back the evidence for tattooing in Africa by a millennium'.

These naturally mummified individuals are from Egypt's Predynastic period, the era preceding the country's unification by the first pharaoh at around 3100 BCE. All visible skin on these mummified individuals was examined for signs of body modification as part of a new program of conservation and research. The male mummy, known as **Gebelein Man A** has been on display almost continuously since his discovery around 100 years ago. Previous CT scans showed that Gebelein Man A was a young man when he died (18 – 21 years of age) from a stab wound to the back. Dark smudges on his arm, appearing as faint markings under natural light had remained unexamined. Infrared photography recently revealed that these smudges were in fact tattoos of two slightly overlapping horned animals. The horned animals have been tentatively identified as a wild bull (long tail, elaborate horns) and a Barbary sheep (curving horns, humped shoulder). Both animals are well known in Predynastic Egyptian art. The designs are not superficial and have been applied to the dermis layer of the skin, the pigment

was carbon-based, possibly some kind of soot. He may have worn the tattoos as symbols of power or strength. Previously archaeologists had thought that tattooing was gender restricted and only applied to women. This was due to 'tattoos' being depicted only on female figurines of the period. But the discovery of tattoos on the male mummy now shows body modification concerned both sexes.

The female mummy, known as **Gebelein woman**, has several tattoos, a series of four small 'S' shaped motifs can be seen running vertically over her right shoulder. Below them on the right arm is a linear motif which is similar to objects held by figures participating in ceremonial activities on the painted ceramics of the period. It may represent a crooked staff, a symbol of power and status, or a throw-stick or batons and/or clappers used in ritual dance. The S-motif also appears as an element of Predynastic pottery decoration, always in multiples. Both sets of tattoos would have been highly visible and may have denoted status, bravery, cult/magical knowledge or protection.

Seven mummies from the same site, Gebelein in the southern part of Upper Egypt (around 40km south of modern-day Luxor) were examined as part of the research, though tattoos were only found on two. Originally buried in shallow graves, the bodies were naturally desiccated by the heat, salinity and aridity of the Egyptian desert, preserving their soft tissues. The radiocarbon results, supported by isotopic data on hair and bone, confirm all seven mummies date to the Predynastic period with collective dates ranging from 3932 – 3030 cal BC, with the two tattooed individuals dating to 3351 to 3017 cal BC (95.4% probability). Bar one, these individuals had been buried in a crouched position on their left sides typical of the period (the other is on his right side).

The application of tattoos to the human body has enjoyed a long and diverse history in many ancient cultures. At present the oldest surviving examples are the mainly geometric tattoos on the Alpine mummy known as Ötzi (4th millennium BCE) whose skin was preserved by the ice of the Tyrolean Alps. Based on the radiocarbon dates, the Gebelein tattoos are, approximately contemporary with Ötzi (3370-3100 cal BC), and can therefore be considered amongst the earliest surviving tattoos in the world. These finds demonstrate conclusively that tattooing was practised during Egypt's Predynastic (c. 4000-3100 BCE) period and they push back the evidence for tattooing in Africa by a millennium. As the oldest known tattooed figural motifs, they add to our understanding of the range of potential uses of tattoos at the dawn of Ancient Egyptian civilization and expand our view of the practice of tattooing in prehistoric times.

Notes to Editors

The primary authors of the paper are Renee Friedman of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford and Daniel Antoine, British Museum.

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