



PREHISTORY OF IRAN: ARTIFICIAL CRANIAL MODIFICATIONS

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Cranial modification is caused during infancy through the shaping of a baby's head whilst it is still malleable. Such shaping can be caused by both intentional and unintentional means, using objects such as bandages or textiles, wooden boards, or even simply massaging the head, causing either a flattening or elongation of the human skull (Dingwall, pp. 12-13; Brofin, p. 191; Molleson, pers. comm.). The prehistoric Iranian examples known so far all result from such ante mortem modification of the skull, as is also the case with many other examples recovered from throughout the Near East (Arensburg and Hershkovitz, 1988; Idem, 1989; Molleson and Campbell; Meiklejohn et al.; Özbek; Senyurek and Tunakan; Fletcher et al.; Daems and Croucher). Cranial modification is one of the most obvious examples we have from the archaeological record of the active manipulation of the body during life, demonstrating choices to treat the body in particular ways, with implications in terms of the reflection of identity and identity construction (Daems and Croucher; Croucher, 2004; Idem, 2005; Idem, 2006).



Skeletal remains have so far been recovered from 18 of the 285 reported sites from Late Neolithic to Middle Chalcolithic Iran (Hours et al.). It should be noted, however, that the region defined as Iran would not have been in existence during prehistoric times; it is simply used here as a modern region of study. From this study area, examples from five sites attest to the presence of artificial cranial modification, almost one-third of the sample, indicating the potential prevalence of the practice. At least 27 skulls are reliably defined as having been artificially modified. These have so far been recovered from Ganj Darra, Teppa Ghenil, 'Ali Koš (see 'ALIKOŠ), Čogā Safid), and Čogā Miš (q.v.; see Meiklejohn et al., p. 84; Hours et al., p. 103; Hole, pp. 91-92).

At the settlement of Ganj Darra datable to the 9th-8th millennia BCE, from a total of 69 individuals (most of which were not complete), were recovered 14 skulls, all of which had been altered artificially through the use of bandages (Meiklejohn et al., p. 89). One of these crania is female and two are male; three others are probably female and five more probably male; three are of undetermined sex (Meiklejohn et al., p. 91, Table 4). The nearby 8th-millennium BCE settlement of Teppa Ghenil revealed remains of one individual of undetermined sex whose skull had been artificially modified, again using bandages (Meiklejohn et al., pp. 86-89; Hours et al., p. 138). From the broadly contemporary site of 'Ali Koš, at least three females of the 14 adult inhumations found beneath the houses displayed evidence of artificially modified skulls (Hole et al., p. 42). At nearby Čogā Safid, evidence for artificial cranial modification is present in at least six unsexed skulls (FIGURE 1), dated to around the 7th-6th millennia BCE (Hours et al., p. 103; Hole, pp. 91, 344-45, pls. 28 and 30). Finally, one of the two burials dated to the 5th-millennium BCE Middle Susiana period site of Čogā Miš also displays evidence of artificial cranial modification (Ortner, pp. 319-20). At Ganj Darra and Čogā Safid all skulls recovered display clear traces of artificial cranial modification, suggesting that either all individuals from these sites underwent this treatment, regardless of rank and gender, or that only those persons with cranial modification underwent a specific post mortem treatment, that is, interment within the site rather than interment outside of the site or other mortuary disposal. This latter point, which seems more probable in light of the small sample, points to interpretations that these particular persons were regarded as different or 'other' in some sense. This position may have been due to their kin, gender, ethnic identity, or perceived role, and could have been hereditary, especially given that modification would have occurred during infancy.



Figurine evidence can further support skeletal information, providing insights into bodily treatment. Whilst the list of functions attributed to human figurines is lengthy, it is indisputable that many represent realistic portrayals; whether representative of actual individuals or demonstrating a generic image, they demonstrate achievable human appearances. Consequently, they are useful in a study of human appearance and related identity, offering further insights into the treatment and portrayal of the human body. Significantly, some human figurines in the Iranian prehistoric record display elongated or exaggerated head shapes.

Of the five Late Neolithic to Middle Chalcolithic Iranian sites from which intentionally modified skulls were recovered, Ganj Darra, 'Ali Koš, Čoġā Safid, and Čoġā Miš have human figurines in their archaeological repertoire. Unfortunately, several of the figurines recovered from these sites have either been poorly published or lack secure contexts. Additionally, many are too fragmentary to aid our analysis (e.g., 'Ali Koš in Hole et al., pp. 224-25, fig. 97a). Evidence from the site of Čoġā Miš is more promising. Of the 38 human figurine fragments known, three are remains of heads, of which two seem relevant here (FIGURE 2 and FIGURE 3). Both show a round frontal view but appear to be clearly flattened and elongated at the back of the head. In both cases, the contour of the head is painted black as if to accentuate a type of headgear, hairstyle, or the skull of the figurine. It is feasible that the black band encircling their heads indicates bandage bindings. The head shape of Figure 3 could also be an indication of an elongated skull, of the type that is common on many Ubayd-4 figurines from Southern Mesopotamia (Molleson and Campbell, p. 51, fig. 9.3).

The artificially modified skull from Čoġā Miš was recovered from the late Middle Susiana levels, a period from which no human figurines have so far been found (Delougaz et al., p. 258), with both of the figurine fragments (FIGURE 2 and FIGURE 3) recovered from the preceding Early Susiana levels. That they are earlier than the skeletal material may suggest that the practice seen in the later Middle Susiana period could form part of a longer tradition. Further figurines of interest have been recovered from the sites of 7th-millennium BCE Sarab (Broman Morales, pls. 11c, 11e), 6th-millennium BCE Yanik Teppa (Burney, p. 55, pl. 15: fig. 11), 5th-millennium BCE Susa (Spycket, pl. 3: fig. 13 and pl. 4: fig. 39), and Tall-e Bakun (Langsdorff and McCown, pl. 6: fig. 25). On each of these figurines the shape of the head is clearly accentuated, suggesting the importance of head shape at these particular sites.



In addition to figurines, further evidence can be gained from other depictions, such as representations of humans on pottery shreds, as recovered from the Neolithic site of Tell Sabi Abyad (Tall Şabi Abyaž) in Syria and the Chalcolithic site Tell Madhur in Mesopotamia (Molleson and Campbell, p. 52, fig. 9.4). Some samples of Iranian pottery also display humans with an elongated or exaggerated head shape, such as on shreds recovered from the Late Chalcolithic sites of Češma-‘Ali and Tall-e Bakun A (FIGURE 4). Whilst it is clear that in some cases the representations could demonstrate either cranial modification or more temporary alterations of hairstyle or wearing of headgear, what is nevertheless evident is the exaggeration and importance shown to the head, given prominence in certain portrayals during this particular period of Iranian prehistory.

It seems that the practice of artificial cranial modification was most likely restricted to certain members of the community, and perhaps in the case of hairstyles or headgear, it was only important at certain times or for particular events. It is even feasible that an idealized type is being portrayed through these images and figurines (Molleson and Campbell, p. 52). Even if the depictions are intended to represent deities or idols, an achievable human appearance is still being displayed. It seems feasible that the modeling of some of the figurines was intended to portray idealistic or desirable features. These figurines offer further insight into possibilities of bodily treatment at this time, confirming the importance of head shape seen in the later skeletal material.

Cranial modification is traditionally interpreted as indicative of rank and status in society, a means of defining elitism within a group (e. g., Molleson and Campbell, p. 52), and this is certainly possible at the Iranian sites studied. Gender distinctions may also have featured as a motivation in some cases. At ‘Ali Koš, for instance, artificial cranial modification seems to be restricted to females (Meiklejohn et al., p. 89), as was also the case in the Levantine site of Byblos (Özbek, p. 470) and at the Anatolian site of Seyh Höyük (Senyurek and Tunakan, p. 441). Nevertheless, caution should prevail when attributing artificial cranial modification to one sex; often the sample is too small to be conclusive, and problems have been identified in the reliable sexing of skeletal remains (Weiss).

The use of cranial modification as an ethnic marker has been discussed through many South American examples (Hoshower et al., p. 145). The possibility that cranial modification served as a mnemonic device of inherited



identity, has also recently been considered by Jones (p. 2) in relation to Late Prehistoric Cyprus. Ethnographic sources repeatedly describe the importance of bodily decoration and modification as inextricably entwined with concepts of beauty, aesthetics, and appearance (e. g., Berns, pp. 62-63; Riefenstahl, pp. 219ff.; Faris, p. 31).

It is not unfeasible that comparable motivations were behind some of the Iranian examples presented here. However, whilst the concrete motivations behind cranial modification are undoubtedly out of our grasp, it can reasonably be argued that the practice demonstrates a choice to visually mark the identity of the wearer. It is clear from both the mortuary material and evidence from figurines that a specific head-shape was apparently a desired attribute. Although the practice is likely to have held different meanings in different locations and contexts, one thing that is clearly demonstrated through cranial modification is power over the body, not by the self but by another, presumably the parent or other adult. This highly visual indicator would impress on the wearer as well as others either a sense of otherness and difference, or of inclusion, which would surely serve to construct, as well as reflect, identity.

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