
MODERN PARALLELS FOR ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TATTOOING

Author(s): Carl Schuster and O. H. MYERS

Source: *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1948, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1948), pp. 71-77

Published by: University of Khartoum

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41716539>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Sudan Notes and Records*

JSTOR

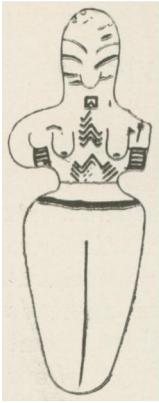
MODERN PARALLELS FOR ANCIENT EGYPTIAN TATTOOING.

By Carl Schuster.

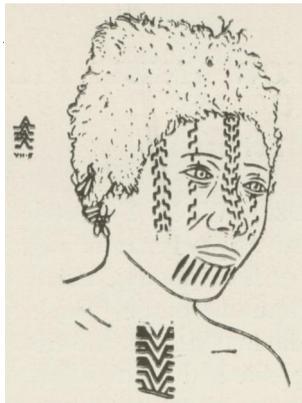
IN *Prehistoric Egypt* (London, 1920), W. M. F. Petrie illustrates (pl. vi, V, 4) the body-marking of a predynastic figurine, which we reproduce as Fig. 1. By the side of his drawing, Petrie has introduced the chest tattooing of a modern Papuan woman, which he recommends (*op. cit.*, p. 9) for comparison with the marking on the chest of the ancient Egyptian figurine. In his drawing (marked "vii. 5" at the right of our Fig. 1) Petrie has inverted the Papuan chest-marking to make it agree with that of the Egyptian figurine. Actually, the Papuan design appears as we reproduce it in Fig. 2, from Petrie's source (an article on Papuan tattooing by F. R. Barton in *J. R. A. I.*, 48, 1918); but as Petrie points out, and as we see from another predynastic figurine of the same period, Fig. 3, this ancient Egyptian chest-marking sometimes takes a form virtually identical with the modern Papuan marking, namely that of a column of interlocking M-shaped marks.

Petrie does not commit himself as to the significance of this comparison. Obviously, if the parallel is accidental, it may be dismissed as a curiosity. But if it is not accidental, then we cannot escape the conclusion that it forms part of an extensive cultural complex demanding investigation. Actually (as I hope to show in a forthcoming larger publication), the Papuan chest-marking illustrated in Fig. 2 is but a variant of a type widespread throughout the Pacific area. This type of marking consists generally of a great V or M extending from the centre of the chest, or sometimes from a point lower down, in the region of the navel, diagonally upwards towards the two shoulders. This marking may be carried out in pigment tattooing, scarification, or painting; but in any case it is commonly composed of two or more parallel rows of dots (this characteristic multiplicity of outline is reflected in the compact or reduced version of the design on the girl's neck in Fig. 2).

The fact that this type of chest-marking is so widely distributed throughout the Pacific suggests that it must be rooted in ancient tradition. And this conclusion is confirmed by the observation that closely similar markings occur widely throughout negro Africa: examples in our Figs. 6, 7, 8 and 10 (after Fulleborn, *Deutsch-Ost-Afrika*, 8, 1902, pl. 29, 3 b; K. Lampert, *Die Volker der Erde*, ii, 1902, p. 149; a photo of the S. A. Barrett African Expedition of the Milwaukee Public Museum, 1929; and E. J. Wayland in *J. R. A. I.*, 59, 1929, pl. L, respectively). Finally,



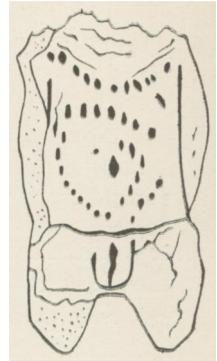
1. PREDYNASTIC EGYPT



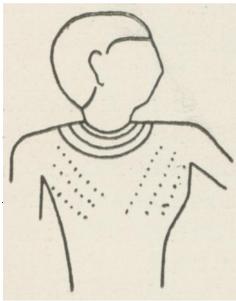
2. PAPUA



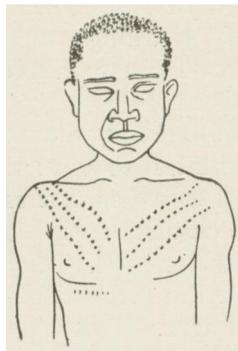
3. PREDYNASTIC EGYPT



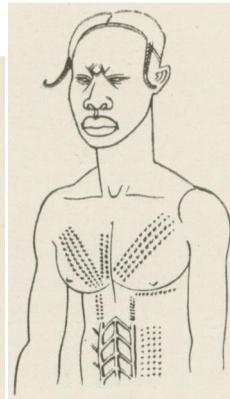
4. MORAVIA: AURIGNACIAN



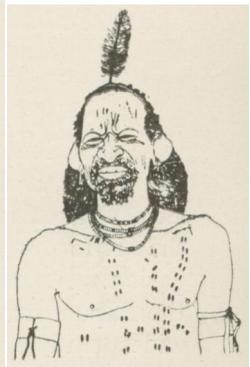
5. EGYPT: MIDDLE KINGDOM



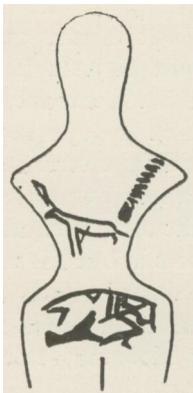
6. NYASSALAND



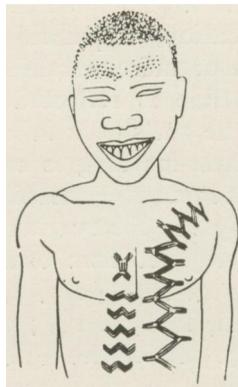
7. CONGO



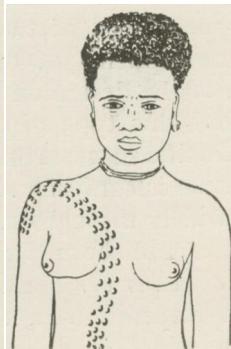
8. UGANDA (TURKANA)



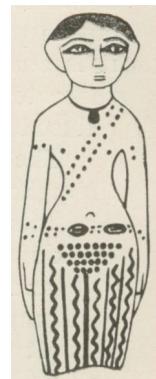
9. PREDYNASTIC EGYPT



10. UGANDA (BAAMBA)



11. SOLOMON ISLANDS



12. EGYPT: MIDDLE KINGDOM

a hint of the great historical depth of this tradition is provided by the occurrence of a similar chest-marking in ancient Egypt: our Fig. 5, taken from a memorial tombstone of the Middle Kingdom at Abydos (Lange and Schafer, *Cat. gen. du Musée du Caire*, no. 20001-20780, vol. iv, pl. lxxxvi, no. 465: in the text, p. 163, the authors designate the rows of dots as "tattooing" with a question-mark). The structure of this Middle-Kingdom chest-marking is so much like that of the numerous modern African (and Oceanic) markings that it is difficult to avoid the inference of an historical connection of some kind between them.

If there is such a connection, the problem arises whether we are to suppose that the motive originated in ancient Egypt and spread in to Negro Africa (and thence, presumably, into Oceania), or whether, on the contrary, the motive is not rather one of immense antiquity among primitive races (in Africa and elsewhere), long antedating even the rise of Egyptian civilization. Among arguments supporting the latter view must, I believe, be counted the circumstance that the V-marking as illustrated in Fig. 5 is exceptional in Middle-Kingdom Egypt.

Another question, which perhaps will find its answer within this framework, is how to bridge the gap of two millennia between the predynastic figurines of the Amratian period (about 4000 B.C.) with their compact columns of M-shaped markings on the chest, and the related but somewhat different Middle-Kingdom marking of Fig. 5. Might it not seem reasonable to suppose that these related body-markings in two widely separated periods in the history of Egyptian culture are reflections of the repeated or constant cultural contact with more primitive peoples of the South?

In relation to this question we wish to call attention to two more ancient Egyptian figurines, one of which, Fig. 9 (after Petrie, *op. cit.*, pl. vi. V, 1) belongs in the same class of predynastic creations as Figs. 1 and 3. Though this drawing shows the back, we may perhaps be justified in interpreting the painted decoration as equivalent to a chest-design, inasmuch as the V-shaped chest-marking is often repeated on the back, with little or no variation, among modern primitive peoples of both Africa and Oceania. In Fig. 9, then, we have an asymmetrical design in which one arm of the V is made up of what we may regard as a characteristic cicatrization or tattooing pattern, namely a series of short transverse strokes, evidently equivalent to dots, while the other arm of the V must be regarded either as missing, or perhaps as supplanted by the horns of an antelope. The asymmetry of this arrangement strongly recalls a series of Oceanic tattooings and scarifications in which only one arm of the V-shaped chest-marking is carried out, the other arm

being suppressed, perhaps because of the pain of the operation, or perhaps simply out of a sense of smartness and novelty, or sometimes being supplanted by a diagonal motive of a different type. Fig. 11 (after D. L. Oliver in *Natural History* (New York), 50, 1942) shows a characteristic example of this asymmetrical arrangement from the Solomon Islands. I am not aware of any great frequency of such arrangements in modern Africa, but reproduce in Fig. 10 an African scarification in which one arm of the V is made of a zigzag line, and the other of a column of M-marks, analogous to the median chest-markings of the predynastic figurines, Figs. 1 and 3.

Finally, in Fig. 12, we have another Egyptian figurine, dating, like Fig. 5, from the Middle Kingdom (after M. Matthieu, "Les statuettes magiques coptes et égyptiennes," *Trudy otдела vostoka gosudarstvennoi Ermitazha*, 1, 1937). This specimen is somewhat of an exception within its type. Many such figurines are decorated on the lower body with diamond-shaped groups of spots which are known to represent tattooing (see H. E. Winlock in *Bull. Metropol. Mus.*, v. 18, part ii, Dec. 1923, p. 26 and fig. 20; and Winlock, *Excavations at Deir el Bahri*, New York, 1942, p. 74), while the upper body is decorated by two rows of dots crossing diagonally at right angles to form two X's, one on the chest and one on the back, generally thought to represent strings of beads (examples: Winlock in *Bull. Metr. Mus.*, 18, as above, fig. 15; Ambrose Lansing in the same *Bulletin*, v. 29, part ii, Non. 1934, fig. 29, second doll from left; H. Schafer in *Amliche Berichte aus den kgl. Kunstsammlungen*, 34, 1913, col. 51, fig. 22, with tattooed spots on the forehead as well; Paris, Musée du Louvre, Dép. égyptien, No. 10942, apparently unpublished, similar to the last, but with tattooed spots on cheeks rather than forehead). Though relatively naturalistic, such figurines nevertheless show traces of archaism — for example in the absence of feet — which connect them unmistakably with their predynastic predecessors. In Fig. 12 we are interested in the exceptional arrangement of the spots on the chest, which, instead of forming the usual "X," are aligned in two parallel rows extending diagonally from the left shoulder to the right hip. If these are indeed beads, the illustration should be cancelled from consideration; but it seemed to me to be worth including, on the chance that the diagonal rows of dots might reflect tattooing and thus provide a Middle-Kingdom example of the asymmetrical or abortive type of V-shaped chest-marking.

Now, the tattooed "dancing girls" of the Middle Kingdom, represented by tomb figurines of the type of Fig. 12, are generally regarded as being of Nubian race (see Winlock in *Bull. Metr. Mus.*, v. 23, part ii,

Feb., 1928, p. 10 fig. 11 ; and *ibid.*, v. 27, part ii, Mar., 1932, pp. 33-34). And the predynastic figurines which carry the characteristic V or W shaped chest-markings are evidently modelled after a steatopygous race which once flourished in palaeolithic Europe, and is now extinct except in South Africa — a race which in predynastic times presumably provided the slaves whose modelled images were placed in tombs to accompany their masters into the afterworld (Petrie, *Prehistoric Egypt*, p. 9). The occurrence of these body-markings on figures of women belonging to a race which has gradually receded southward from palaeolithic times in Europe and was still known in Amratian times in Egypt, but now survives only in the Bushmen of South Africa, suggests an interesting problem in cultural history. Could this ancient steatopygous race or its palaeolithic contemporaries have been the original bearers of this type of body-marking, which is now so widely spread throughout Negro Africa and Oceania, and of which we find occasional reflections in the predynastic and dynastic art of Egypt? As a commentary on this question, we reproduce, in Fig. 4, a drawing of the modelled torso of a so-called "Venus" found in 1934 at Vestonice in Moravia, Czechoslovakia representing an Aurignacian culture of the ice age, some 30,000 years ago. The rows of incisions on the body are described by the discoverer as "geometrical dotted lines, resembling tattoo patterns of present-day primitive tribes" (K. Absalon in *The Illustrated London News*, 28th March, 1936, p. 547). Is it merely an accident that the patterns formed by these rows of incisions on a palaeolithic figurine include the motive of a flattened V on the chest? (Compare a somewhat similar, but not quite V-shaped, marking on the early Aurignacian "Venus" of Brassempouy: E. Piette, *L'art pendant l'âge du renne*, Paris, 1907, pl. lxxi)

This is, of course, a question of vast range. In bringing it to the attention of readers of Sudan Notes and Records, my hope was a more limited one. Since the only modern African examples of V-shaped chest-marking hitherto known to me are from more southerly Negroes, as represented in the illustrations, and since the area of ancient Nubia must obviously have played an important role in the exchange of cultural impulses between primitive Africa and civilized Egypt, it would be of great interest to learn of any modern tattooing or scarification of this type from the geographically intermediate area of the Sudan. My hope, accordingly, was that any interested residents of the Sudan who might chance to see this notice would be good enough to communicate to me, through the kind offices of the editor of this journal, any pertinent material, especially from the Sudan, in the form of documentation or comments.

APPENDIX.

Mr. Schuster has asked me to append a note on the historical implications of this subject with reference to relations between Ancient Egypt and Nubia. Time and space make it impossible to examine the matter in any detail, but when a study begun in Melanesia leads to Ancient Egypt and even Palaeolithic Moravia its interest and importance for Prehistory must be apparent to all.

The Sudan, especially the Northern Province, is one of the key places for the study of early migrations and contacts, for after 2,500 B.C. the Nile was the only possible route North and South, between the Caucasian and Negro areas, this side of the Western Sahara. Our knowledge of the ancient inhabitants of Nubia is exceedingly patchy and any clue that can help us towards a fuller knowledge is of great value not only to the history of the Sudan but also to the elucidation of the Prehistoric period over North Africa, South Arabia and South India. The existence of these tattooing or scarification marks among the Nuba or the Nilotic tribes might be even more significant than if found only among the negroes, but all evidence is valuable.

The question of steatopygy, raised by Mr. Schuster, may also provide clues. The theory he suggests is still the most widely accepted, though Madame Luce Passemard has thrown doubt upon the true steatopygy of the Palaeolithic figurines (*Le Vénus Stéatopyge*, Nîmes, 1938) and others have also inclined to the view that the great fatness indicated is no more than the hallmark of the Mother Goddess (see in particular G. D. Hornblower "Predynastic Figurines of Women and Their Successors" in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, No. XV, pp. 29-47), and I think that an impartial study of Plates XXXIX to XLVII of H. Winkler's *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt* II, London, 1939, will convince anyone that there was true steatopygy at Dakhla Oasis, very possibly accompanied by similar tattoo marks to those seen in the illustrations here.

There are some indications that in the Nile Valley in Egypt both the tattooing and steatopygy were a southern influence (they reappear in figurines during the "pan-Grave" infiltration from Nubia during the New Kingdom) except in so far as an earlier people of this type (Bushmen?) may have been enslaved by the earliest Egyptians known to us — the so-called Badarian peoples of *circa* 5,000 B.C. More light may perhaps be shed on the Egyptian side by L. Keimer's forthcoming "Rémarques sur le tatouage dans l'Égypte Ancienne" (tome LIII des *Mémoires de l'Institut d'Égypte*, in the Press).

Meanwhile it will be most helpful for all students of these difficult and complex questions if Mr. Schuster's interesting note and Sr. Miguel Covarrubia's drawings elicit any Sudanese parallels.

O. H. MYERS.