Wounds prepared with iron: tattoos in antiquity

Martin Dinter and Astrid Khoo

Tattoos were often seen as something undesirable or as marks of disgrace in antiquity. However, as Martin Dinter and Astrid Khoo explain, many were also voluntarily applied for personal, cultural, and religious reasons.

The mark of a slave

Aetius of Amida, the court physician to the emperor Justinian, noted down his recipe for tattoo removal in the sixth century A.D. His ingredients include nitre and resin of terebinth – caustic substances which would have 'ulcerated' the skin over twenty days, causing excruciating pain. Reading this today, we might think the existence of such remedies means that being tattooed was undesirable, even shameful. As we shall soon see, this stigma did not apply to all tattoos, though it often did.

Tattoos were commonly applied to punish and functioned as 'noticeboards of guilt'; similarly, slaves were branded on the forehead to show their inferior status. These tattoos could contain their own names or that of their *dominus* (owner). The emperor Caligula in an act of cruelty thus tattooed noble Roman youths with his name before condemning them to slavery. Slave tattoos could also include instructions for onlookers. An ancient commentator on the Greek orator Aeschines reports that some slaves were marked with the command 'Stop me, I'm a runaway!'

These marks of slavery were not only humiliating and degrading; they also caused lifelong ostracism. According to the *Lex Fufia* and *Lex Aelia* (promulgated in 2 B.C. and A.D. 4 respectively), tattooed slaves, even when released, could never aspire to the rank of citizen. They could only become *peregrini*, freedmen with no political rights. Accordingly, former slaves often tried to hide their tattoos using *splenia*, small cosmetic bandages which were pasted onto the skin. However, these efforts often failed comically. In his *Epigrams* Martial laughs at a man whose forehead was bespangled with patches: covered, as it were, with stars. But 'remove the patches', he adds, 'and you will read who he is'. In other words, he was a branded ex-slave who unsuccessfully tried to disguise his origins.

Punitive tattoos

Long before the Greeks and Romans, however, Near Eastern societies practised punitive tattooing. By the time of the Pentateuch's completion in 400 B.C., a strong taboo against tattooing had already developed in Jewish culture. This vehement social stigma is encapsulated in the prohibition recorded in Leviticus: 'You shall not etch a tattoo on yourselves'. In addition, the second century A.D. *Mishnah* stated that 'engraving with ink or pigment or anything that leaves an impression was a crime punishable by whipping'. A long tradition of forced tattooing had engendered a negative view of tattooing among the Jews, which was later reinforced by Rabbinic commentaries. The medieval scholar Maimonides explained that 'pagans', such as the Canaanites, had tattooed their Jewish captives and thereby consecrated them to idols. Indeed, the Jews viewed tattooing as unlawful due to its historical associations with idolatry and slavery.

Along with slaves, criminals were also forcibly tattooed. These tattoos revealed their offences and shamed them for past wrongdoing. The Roman comic writer Plautus notes that thieves were marked with the word '*FVR*' (Latin for 'thief'). Similarly, Cicero observes that those found guilty of false accusations received a '*K*' on their foreheads for '*Kalumniator*'.

In the third century A.D., tattoos came to be associated with one dissident group in particular. The emperor Valerian, who reigned from 257 to 260, stigmatized Christianity by ordering that its adherents should be tattooed with crucifixes. According to the deacon Pontius, this

Two Scythian archers back to back © Trustees of the British Museum.

Athenian red-figure amphora: a Thracian woman, bearing tattoos on her neck, right forearm, and the instep of each foot, slays Orpheus with a lance.
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punishment soon became common: 'Many confessors were sealed with a second inscription on their distinguished foreheads.' The 'first inscription' implied here is the invisible and yet indelible cross of baptism. Similarly, Hilary of Poitiers in A.D. 360 stated that bishops were tattooed with the phrase 'condemned to the mines'; the degrading practice of forced tattooing was thus combined with the draconian penalties of hard labour and exile.

By marking individuals with unwanted signs, the state demonstrated its unlimited authority over its subjects' bodies. Facial tattoos were especially poignant in that they constituted public symbols of subjugation. Moreover, given that tattoo removal was a difficult and dangerous process, tattoos signified permanent submission to the state.

A sign of nobility

Tempting as it might seem to generalize all tattoos in antiquity as unwanted marks, forcibly imposed upon unwilling subjects by powerful institutions, punitive tattoos represent only one piece of the picture. Tattoos also carried out a decorative function; in some contexts, they were highly-appreciated pieces of body art and enhanced both the status and beauty of those tattooed.

The warlike and nomadic Scythians, who roamed the Caucasus, distinguished themselves through complex and evocative tattoo designs. Large pieces of skin containing a variety of tattooed scenes have been preserved from Scythian warriors. One such piece was recently exhibited by the British Museum as part of an exhibition on 'Scythians: Warriors of Ancient Siberia'. From this we learn that warriors adorned themselves with bucking horses, striped serpents, and fantastic beasts locked in combat. These patterns, governed by a set of artistic conventions, constituted a separate visual language: reversed hind-quarters on an animal tattoo, for example, meant that the beast in question was dead.

This positive take on tattooing was, however, most prominent among the Thracians, an Eastern European tribe subdued first by the Macedonians and then by the Romans. In Thracian culture, tattoos were so common that the word ἐλαφόστικτος, meaning 'Deer-tattooed', was even used as an epithet. According to Herodotus, they believed that 'to be tattooed is a sign of noble birth'. The high social status of tattoos in Thracian culture meant that their tattoos depicted neither ugly accusations nor insinuations of servitude.

Instead, they adorned themselves with pleasing patterns, which accentuated their legs, arms, and neck. Their designs were often simple, such as straight lines, waves, dots, and zig-zags. These straightforward patterns have not lost their appeal over time: temporary Thracian tattoos were produced in Bulgaria during the 2016 exhibition 'A Mirror of Time: Female Beauty over the Centuries'. More complex patterns, often inspired by nature, complemented these rudimentary tattoos. As Xenophon observes in his *Anabasis*, Thracian women 'decorated themselves on back and front…with flowers'. They also accentuated their lithe and agile bodies with silhouettes of animals, especially snakes and does.

Ancient writers were aware that the Thracians held a unique perspective on tattoos. As the anonymous author of the fifth-century B.C. *Dissoi Logoi* ('Double Arguments') observes, 'Among the Thracians the tattooing of girls is a form of ornament, whereas for others it is a way of punishing a criminal'. Evidently, the multiplicity of cultures in the ancient world also led to dissenting beauty standards. These differences suggest that we should not view all tattoos as derogatory symbols; when voluntarily applied, tattoos decorated and celebrated the body.

The sacred and the divine

Outside the Greek and Roman world, the significance of tattoos varied wildly. In Egypt, tattoos carried magical and religious functions. Mummified corpses reveal that as early as 2000 B.C., women received dot-pattern tattoos on their abdomens. The purpose of these tattoos is believed to have been the enhancement of fertility. Faience figurines, which were interred with the dead to ensure resurrection, exhibited similar dot-patterns on their abdomens and thighs. These dolls were evidently meant as fertility charms for living relatives, as one figurine bears the following hieroglyphic inscription: 'May a birth be granted to your daughter Seh'. The connection between tattoos and fertility is also perceptible from how these patterns would stretch into symbolic

‘web’ or ‘netting’ designs during pregnancy. What is more, their placement on sexually suggestive body parts – the abdomen, breasts, and thighs – further implies that they were related to procreation. This link between fertility and tattooing was deeply rooted in Egyptian culture; Hathor, the goddess of motherhood, was served by tattooed priestesses.

Nevertheless, religious tattoos were not always applied for fertility reasons. The Egyptians also tattooed their faces and wrists with arcane symbols so as to invoke divine protection. Indeed, tattooing was so widespread that the Egyptians refined complex methods for the creation and maintenance of sacred tattoos. They sewed ritual patterns, usually consisting of dots and dashes, into the skin using blackened thread. After applying their chosen designs, the Egyptians also carried out a sanitizing process which resembles the modern practice of ‘tattoo aftercare’. They bandaged fresh tattoos with poultices containing ‘cloves and leaves of white beet’, which were doubly useful in that they reinforced the design and reduced swelling. Just as modern tattoos peel and flake for a week after application, Egyptian tattoos produced scabs which fell off after seven days.

Tattooed and proud

Certain other methods of marking the skin were particular to specific cultures. Prominent among these were the Ethiopians, who carved patterns into their skin with sharp blades, thus marking themselves through ‘scarification’. Similarly, the Carpocratians, a second-century A.D. gnostic sect from Alexandria, combined branding and tattooing by using red-hot needles on their skin.

Apart from the Carpocratians, the Manichaeans also practised voluntary tattooing in the Late Antique period. In this case, archaeology is a useful supplement to literary testimony. A seventh-century A.D. mummy tattooed with the sign of St Michael has been unearthed in Sudan. This material evidence for voluntary Christian tattooing is corroborated by written sources. Victor of Vita describes the lower-leg tattoo of a Manichaean monk, which read ‘*Manichaeus Discipulus Christi Iesu*’, meaning ‘I am a Manichaean, a disciple of Christ’.

These examples imply that voluntary tattooing was confined to groups which operated outside the orbit of mainland Greece and Italy. During the Late Antique period, however, the Christian subculture also adopted tattoos as manifestations of religious pride. Archaeological evidence for this phenomenon is limited, mainly because climatic conditions and burial practices in the Mediterranean were not conducive to mummification. Papyrus has therefore proved more reliable than human skin in rendering an account of Christian tattoos in Greece and Italy.

Faience figure showing tattoo markings on the thighs, Egypt c. 1750
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Christians marked themselves with the alpha (A) and omega (Ω). These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and therefore suggest that God is the be-all and end-all. The chi-rho, a monogram symbolizing the name of Jesus, and the acronym INRI, which stands for *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews’), were also popular tattoos among Christians. Hence, Christians – who had historically been persecuted through forced tattooing – reclaimed ownership of their bodies by choosing their own body art. Indeed, tattoos in antiquity were not always marks of oppression; they also empowered and shaped identity. In their role as physical manifestations of non-conformity, uniqueness, and individuality, they became potent symbols of personal pride.

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