



## The world's oldest tattoos



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### ABSTRACT

The practice of tattooing has been documented in cultures across the globe and throughout recorded history. While there are several lines of archeological evidence through which to study ancient tattooing, the marks identified on naturally and deliberately preserved human skin provide the only direct evidence of tattooing in antiquity. Until recently there was a discrepancy regarding the identity of the oldest tattooed human remains, with popular and scholarly sources alternately awarding the honor to the Tyrolean Iceman known as Ötzi, or to an unidentified South American Chinchorro mummy. Through a reexamination of the identity of the South American specimen and the associated radiocarbon data, we are able to identify the source of this confusion, and confirm that Ötzi presents the world's oldest preserved tattoos.

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## 1. Introduction

Tattooing, the practice of inscribing the skin with permanent designs and patterns, is a global and indefinably ancient practice. Historical and archeological evidence show tattooing was practiced throughout the world in antiquity, and Indigenous cultures from every continent except Antarctica included tattooing as an essential element of their cultural fabric. Both the body marks and the tattooing process acted to negotiate relationships between individuals and their society, nature, and the spiritual realm. Depending on the culture and time period, Indigenous tattoo traditions have functioned to signal entry into adulthood, reflect social status, document martial achievement, demonstrate lineage and group affiliation, and to channel and direct preternatural forces (see Krutak, 2007, 2012, 2014a).

Cultural contacts, exchanges, missionization, acculturation, and the formation of colonial empires had a widespread negative impact on Indigenous tattoo practices. As a consequence of these factors and the relative biases and inaccuracies of early ethnographic and ethnohistorical accounts, many Indigenous tattoo designs and practices have been forgotten, banned, or disconnected from their prior context and appropriated into modern tattoo culture. Traditional tattooing tools, pigments, and rituals that once held strong cultural values have given

way to modern technologies, health regulations and the consumer marketplace.

In today's global, Westernized society tattooing has both proliferated rapidly and become less collectively regulated, if not entirely culturally unanchored. Rather than specific marks and the circumstances of their application being mandated by social codes, individuals are now largely free to select what, where, and how they are tattooed according to their own intentions. Nevertheless, there exists interest among the tattoo community in documenting and understanding the history of the practice, particularly in regard to the iconography, techniques, and origins of this ancient art.

Despite increasing scholarly and public interest in ancient tattooing over the past decade, there has been ongoing confusion regarding the identity of the oldest preserved tattoos. Popular texts and online sources typically identify the oldest tattoos as belonging to the naturally-mummified European body known as Ötzi. More scholarly sources have alternatively proposed that the oldest tattoos are found on mummified remains from the Chinchorro culture of South America. Following recent research into the identity of the Chinchorro mummy and reexamination of radiocarbon dates we are now able to identify the cause of this discrepancy and conclusively identify what are, to date, the oldest tattoos in the world.

## 2. Background

Although written records of tattooing date back to at least the 5th century BC in Greece (Jones, 1987, 2000), and possibly several centuries earlier in China (Reed, 2000), the actual antiquity of the practice, both

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on a regional basis and as a worldwide phenomenon, remain unknown. In an effort to understand the time depth associated with tattooing, scholars must instead turn to the archeological record. There are three principal lines of archeological evidence for tattooing in ancient and pre-literate societies: Anthropomorphic art, tattoo tools, and preserved human skin (Deter-Wolf, 2013; Tassie, 2003). The first two lines of evidence allow for some conjecture as to the antiquity of tattooing and suggest the practice may have originated at least as early as the Upper Paleolithic. However, interpreting possible permanent body decoration in ancient art is difficult, and methods for differentiating between tattoo

tools and similar implements that may have served different functions are not yet refined (e.g., Deter-Wolf, 2013; Hendrix, 2003; Piprani, 2010; Renaut, 2004b; Tassie, 2003; Zidarov, 2009). Consequently, the best evidence, and only direct archeological proof, for the antiquity of tattooing is found on preserved human skin.

Hundreds of ancient naturally and deliberately mummified tattooed human bodies have been recovered from throughout the world, including the American Arctic, Greenland, Siberia, Western China, the Philippines, Africa, Europe, Mexico, and the Andes. Table 1 presents a selected list of these remains as well as information on associated dates,

**Table 1**

Tattooed human mummies, with associated cultures, dates, and sites.

Date	Culture	Site	Identifier	Sex	Source
3370–3100 BC	Tamins-Carasso-Isera 5	Tisenjoch	Ötzi	M	See discussion, this article
2600–2400 BC	Catacomb Culture	Temrta III, Russia	Tomb 2, Grave 1	M	Shishlina et al. (2013)
2600–2400 BC	Catacomb Culture	Primorsky I, Russia	Tomb 1, Grave 10	M	Shishlina et al. (2013)
2563–1972 BC	Chinchorro	El Morro	Mo-1 T28 C22	M	See discussion, this article
2300–1500 BC	C-Group	Kubban Cemetery 110, Egypt	Grave 271	F	Firth (1927)
2134–1991 BC	Dynasty XI	Deir el Bahari, Egypt	Amunet, Pit 23, Pit 26 (total 3 individuals)	F	Dareessy (1893)
2100–1500 BC	Gumugou	Qāwrihul, China	Loulan Beauty	F	Barber (1999); Romgard (2008)
2055–1700 BC	C-Group	Nekhen Cemetery HK27C, Egypt	Tomb 9, Tomb 10, Tomb 36 (total 3 individuals)	F	Friedman (2004); Pieri and Antoine (2014)
1250 BC–AD 100	Subeixi	Yanghai, China	Multiple individuals?	–	Li (2010) (as cited in Pankova, 2013)
1250 BC–AD 100	Subeixi	Shengjiindian, China	Multiple individuals?	–	Jiang et al. (2015)
1000–600 BC	Zaghunluq	Zaghunluq, China	Unnamed woman <sup>a</sup>	F	Mallory and Mair (2008); Romgard (2008)
800–550 BC	Qizilchoqa	Qizilchoqa, China	Multiple individuals?	F	Mallory and Mair (2008); Romgard (2008)
400–200 BC	Pazyryk	Pazyryk burial ground, Russia	Burial 2 (two individuals), Burial 5 (two individuals)	M/F	Barkova and Pankova (2005)
400–200 BC	Pazyryk	Ak-Alakha 3, Russia	Princess of Ukok (Tomb 1)	F	Polosmak (2000)
400–200 BC	Pazyryk	Verkh-Kaldzhin 2, Russia	Tomb 3	M	Polosmak (2000)
400–200 BC	Pazyryk	Olon-Kurin-Gol 10, Mongolia	Tomb 1	M	Molodin et al. (2008)
500 BC–AD 100	Paracas	Wari Kayan Necropolis, Peru	M12, M28, M29, M30, M32, M66, M70, M73, M81, M85, M86, M87, M110, M199, M234, M319, M355, M420, M437, M451 (total 20 individuals)	M/F	Maita and Minaya (2014)
332 BC–AD 395	Graeco-Roman Period	Akhmim, Egypt	Multiple individuals	F	Strouhal (1992)
300 BC–AD 300	Khotanese-Saka	Shanpula, China	Multiple individuals?	–	Wang (2001) (as cited in Pankova, 2013)
300 BC–AD 400	Meroitic Period	Semna South, Sudan	N-247	–	Alvrus (2001)
300 BC–AD 400	Meroitic Period	Aksha, Egypt	Multiple individuals	F	Vila (1967)
300 BC–AD 400	Meroitic Period	Various cemeteries	Multiple individuals	–	Shinnie (1967)
AD 250	Mixtec	Santa María Camotlán, Oaxaca	Momia Tolteca	F	Leboreiro et al. (2013)
AD 282–405	Old Bering Sea	St. Lawrence Island, Alaska	–	F	Smith and Zimmerman (1975)
AD 372–402	Tashtyk	Oglakhtynsky, Russia	Tomb 4	M	Pankova (2013)
AD 450	Mochica	El Brujo, Peru	La Señora de Cao	F	Franco (2008)
AD 500–1000	Huari	Department of Ica, Peru	Multiple individuals	–	Allison (1996)
AD 700	Sudanese Christian	3-J-23, et-Tereif, Sudan	Grave 50	F	Vandenbeusch and Antoine (2015)
AD 700–800	Mochica	Pacatnamu, Peru	H28 Burial 5	F	Verano (1997)
AD 850–1470	Chimu	Huaura Valley, Peru	Multiple individuals	–	Krutak (2007)
AD 875–1025	Tiwanaku	Azapa 71, Chile	AZ-71 NMT.3	F	Arriaza (1988)
AD 950	Casma	Casma Valley, Peru	Multiple individuals	–	Allison (1996)
AD 1000	Chiribaya Alta	Unknown, Peru	–	F	Pabst et al. (2010)
AD 1000	Ychsma	Cemetery 1, Pachacamac, Peru	Multiple individuals	–	Herrmann and Meyer (1993); Owens and Eeckhout (2015)
1100 AD	–	Ancón, Peru	Multiple individuals	–	Reiss and Stübel (1880–1887); Hambly (1925)
AD 1100–1250	Maitas Chiribaya	Azapa 140, Chile	AZ-140 T.41	F	Arriaza (1988)
AD 1100–1400	Chancay	Cerro Colorado, Peru	El hombre tatuado de Huacho	M	Ruiz (1998)
AD 1100–1400	Chancay	La Centinela, Peru	–	M	Vivar (2008)
AD 1100–1500	Ibaloy	Benguet, Philippines	Apo Anno (multiple additional individuals)	M	Aufderheide (2003); Piombino-Mascali et al. (2013)
AD 1200	San Miguel	Arica area, Chile	Multiple individuals	–	Allison (1996); Arriaza (1988)
AD 1200–1450	Chancay	Rontoy, Peru	Kiko Rontoy	M	Roach (2008)
AD 1250	Ica	Department of Ica, Peru	17, 25, Cateo 2A, Cateo 12 (total 4 individuals)	F	Allison et al. (1981)
AD 1263–1287	–	Ancon, Peru(?)	La Mexicana	F	Alterauge et al. (2013)
AD 1319–1361	Chiu-Chiu (Solar Phase)	Chiu-Chiu, Chile	–	F	Gill-Ferking et al. (2013)
AD 1350	Chimu-Casma	Casma Valley, Peru	SP 292, SP 293, SP 294, SP 295, SP 296, SP 297, SP 298, SP 299, SP 300A, SP 300B, SP 301, SP 302, SP 303 (total 13 individuals)	M/F	Allison et al. (1981)
AD 1450	Inca	Department of Ica, Peru	53	F	Allison et al. (1981)
AD 1475	Inuit	Qilakitsoq, Greenland	I/3, I/4, I/5, II/6, II/8 (total 5 individuals)	F	Hansen et al. (1991)
AD 1470–1533	Ychsma	Armatambo, Peru	CF 168–2000	F	Diaz Arriola (2015)
AD 1600	Ica Colonial	Department of Ica, Peru	AIM 8, AIM 12, Cateo 2A, Cateo 10, HM5 (total 5 individuals)	F	Allison et al. (1981)

<sup>a</sup> Facial markings on “Chärchän Man” and “Chärchän Woman,” (Tomb 2) are popularly reported as tattooing but are likely paint.

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