Changing heads: intentional cranial modification in Pre-Columbian Jamaica

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Introduction

Intentional cranial modification has been practised by populations in the prehistoric as well as in the historic periods in a wide range of geographical localities.

This practice was shown by the populations in their artefacts, described and illustrated in ethnohistorical accounts, and permanently preserved in human skulls. Thus, they became of paleopathological and/or biocultural interest.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the cranial modification reported for the Taínos of Jamaica.

Taínos

Were the inhabitants of the Greater Antilles and the northern Lesser Antilles at the time of European contact. It is likely that they arrived in Jamaica after 650 AD and were extinct by the 16th century (see Allsworth-Jones, 2008).

Taíno lived in houses grouped in villages (Oviedo, 1959 [1526]), used ceramic and stone tools, produced objects of terracotta, stone, and wood, and pictographs and petroglyphs are present in caves (see Atkinson, 2006; Allsworth-Jones, 2008).

Their means of subsistence includes wild plant gathering and agriculture (Oviedo, 1959 [1526]), hunting, fishing, and shellfish collecting (see Atkinson, 2006).

Results and Discussion

The skulls from this Jamaican pre-Columbian population were permanently modified and have been reported in anthropological/archaeological studies since the 19th century.

Site	Number of crania	Author(s)
Pedro Bluff cave	1	Flower, 1891
Halberstadt cave	5 (out of 6)	Flower, 1895
"[A]borigines of Jamaica"	"probably all the [16] skulls"	Haddon, 1897: 23
Cambridge Hill cave	24	Harper, 1961/1962
	20	Santos et al., 2011
Green Castle	1	Santos, 2001
Taylor's Hut cave	1	Santos et al., 2002
Bull Savannah cave B21B.1	1	
Hellshire cave	1	Pers. Com. 2008
Hellshire Hills	2	Gardner et al., 2011
Belle Air cave	1	Allsworth-Jones et al., 2011
Bull Savannah cave #2	1	Santos et al., in prep.

Artificially modified cranium found in a bowl found at Taylor's Hut cave (Santos et al., 2002: 126).

There are different explanations for this cultural practice – *e.g.* religion, status, group or family identity, aesthetics, making the individual healthier, intimidating enemies, among others - but all agree that it carries cultural significance within the population (see Tubbs et al., 2006).

Despite the belief, studies revealed that individuals with artificially modified skulls have similar capacities when compared with non modified crania (*in* Nichter et al., 1986). However, some cases with pathological consequences have been suggested (*e.g.* Bautista, 2000; Santos et al., 2011).

Right lateral and posterior views of the modified cranium EC12-Bull Savannah #2 found in St. Elizabeth Parish.

The osteological evidence shows that both men and women had the shape of their heads changed. Frontal flattening and parietal expansion, also designated as "parallelo-fronto-occipital" modification, is the type represented.

This characteristic corresponds to ethnohistorical descriptions that referred to the population having broad heads (Harper, 1961/1962).

Taíno buried their dead in open air sites and in caves (see Allsworth-Jones, 2008). Modified crania have been found in all types of burial areas.

From the map it can be seen that the human remains found came from archaeological sites around the island.

Because the Taíno, so far, are the only known native peoples in Jamaica this cultural practice can be considered an indirect dating method for identification of Pre-Columbian populations.

Similar cranial modifications were found in neighbouring islands (*e.g.* Duijvenbode, 2011).

Final comments

A systematic evaluation of cranial modifications in Taíno pre-Columbian populations in the Caribbean as well as their distribution among different archaeological / ceramic periods needs to be explored in future studies.

Acknowledgments

To the University of the West Indies, to the Jamaica National Heritage Trust and to CIAS.

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