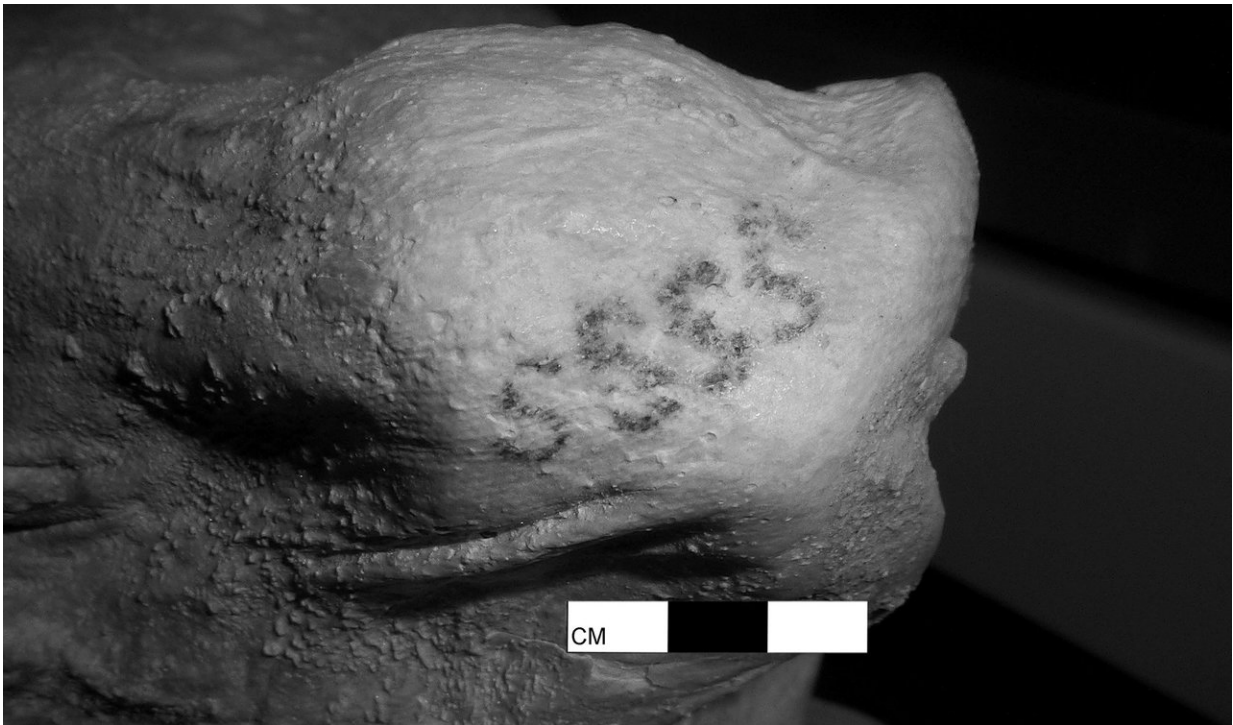


Egyptian mummies found to have oldest figurative tattoos

March 2 2018, by Bob Yirka



Credit: British Museum

A team of researchers from across Europe has found tattoos on two mummies at the British Museum, making them the oldest known examples of figurative tattoos. In their paper published in *Journal of Archaeological Science*, the group describes their study of dark splotches on preserved mummy skin.

Two mummies, one male, the other female, housed in the British Museum, were discovered over a century ago in Gebelein, a city that once existed in ancient Egypt—they have become part of a popular collection that is open to the public. In this new effort, the researchers were interested in dark splotches on the preserved skin. When they shined infrared light on the blotches, they observed distinct images.

The team reports that the light revealed the outline of a Barbary sheep and a wild bull with horns on the upper arm of the male, and S-shaped designs and, on the shoulder of the female, a motif resembling the batons used in rituals. A closer look showed that the outlines were under the skin, and were likely made using soot from a fire, probably with a needle made from copper or bone.

The record for the oldest [tattoo](#) is held by Ötzi the Iceman, but his tattoos were all geometric shapes. The images on the two mummies in the museum depict actual objects or beings, making them figurative, and are the oldest known example of such tattoos at 5000 years, breaking the old record by a thousand years.

In addition to setting a record for tattoos, the finding also shows that archaeologists have been wrong in assuming that only women at the time were tattooed. The different types of tattoos also provide hints as to their purpose. Strong animals with horns likely communicated strength and bravery. The batons on the female, on the other hand, were generally used by women during rituals, and tattooing them on the skin likely represented an extension of that function. The researchers suggest that tattooing in the ancient culture was likely also a means for advertising status or other attributes.

More information: Renée Friedman et al. Natural mummies from Predynastic Egypt reveal the world's earliest figural tattoos, *Journal of Archaeological Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jas.2018.02.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2018.02.002)

© 2018 Phys.org

Citation: Egyptian mummies found to have oldest figurative tattoos (2018, March 2) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2018-03-egyptian-mummies-oldest-figurative-tattoos.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.