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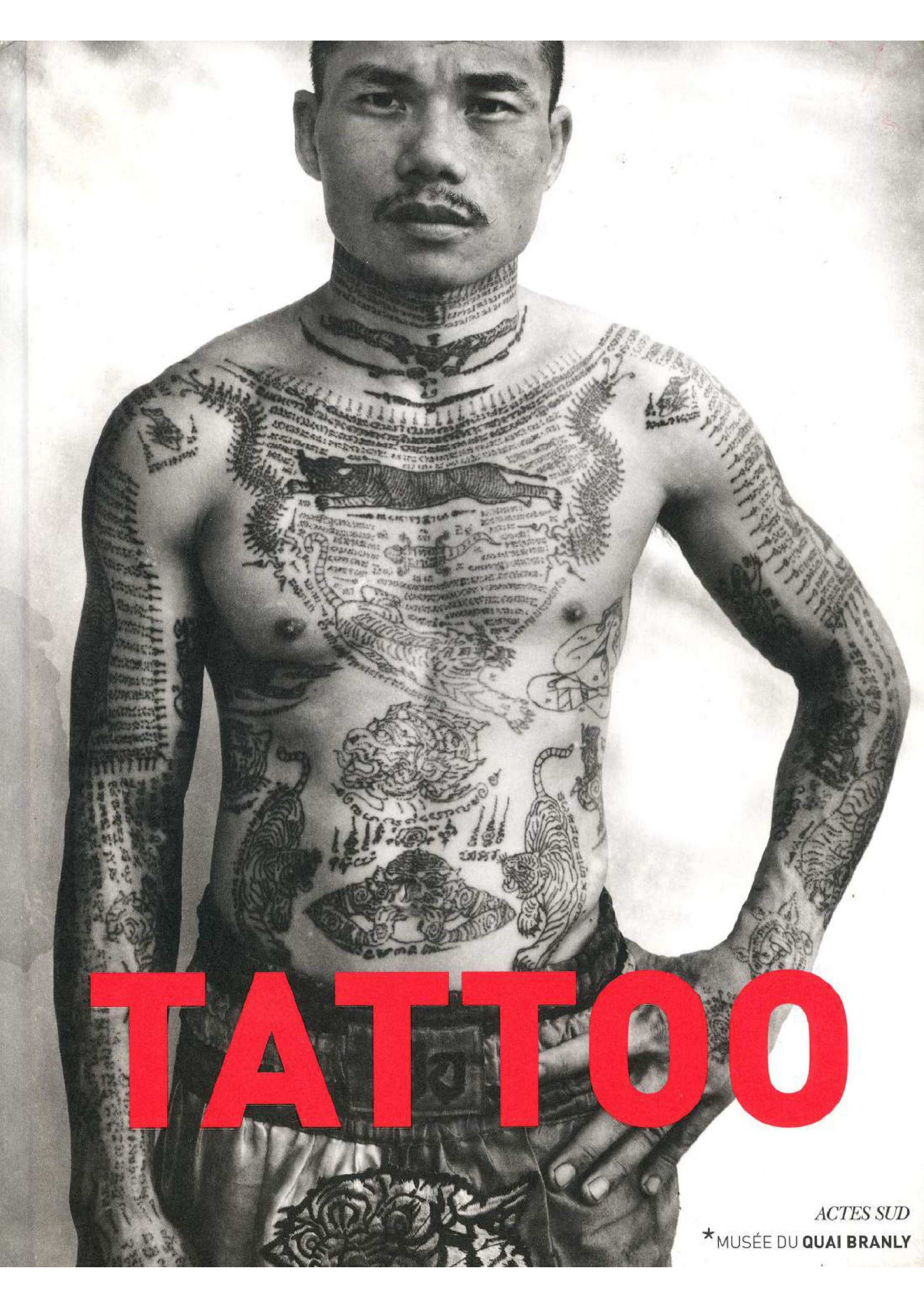
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TATTOO

ACTES SUD

* MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY

TATTOOING IN ANTIQUITY

Luc Renaut

People often think that the further back in time we go, the more widespread the practice of tattooing becomes. Tattooing is actually more susceptible to social structures than to time. In the city states and ancient kingdoms, inscribing the skin was only used for coercive purposes. Tattooing as ornament must be sought outside administered zones.

CUSTOMARY TATTOOING

Traditions of female customary tattooing¹ can be found in several more or less unstratified, sedentary and semi-nomadic societies, situated on the sidelines of ancient kingdoms and large cities, in the Balkans, in the Syrian steppes, on the borders of Upper Egypt, in Arabia² and in North Africa.³ Nothing of the sort is known in Western Europe. From the 3rd century AD on, there are certainly one or two Latin authors who confirm that the natives of the islands of Britain were either tattooed or branded. But these are second-hand reports contradicted by older and more reliable evidence produced by Caesar, Pliny and Tacitus, three authors who were in direct contact with the populations they talk about, reporting the specific (and probably ritual) practice of body painting among the Britons and the Germans.

Syrian Steppes

In the 2nd century AD, at Hierapolis-Bambyke (present-day Manbij) in northern Syria, people went to be tattooed near the temple: *"Everyone was tattooed, men on the wrist, women on the neck; whence the fact that Syrians all have tattoos"*.⁴ Near the temple and not in the temple: this was not a practice desired by the religious authorities, but very likely a form of customary tattooing which wandering craftsmen would propose

to passing *fellahin* and Bedouin. This tradition was still very much alive in the early 20th century⁵: women were tattooed with decorative geometric compositions on their chin, neck, between their breasts, on the belly, the lower back, and the upper and lower limbs. Men sometimes had similar motifs, but only on the wrist and/or hand, and usually on the pretext of dealing with an ache, or strengthening the articulation.

Balkans

A similar tradition of female tattooing (covering the body, with a geometric and rhythmic repertory) is also attested to in northern Greece, in Thrace.⁶ We know as much from several vase paintings from the classical period. The practice of tattooing is also reported in Illyria and among the *lapydes* in the Dinaric Alps.⁷ A tradition of female tattooing has also been described in these same regions in the 19th and 20th centuries (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia). In the Roman era, evidence of Thracian tattooing becomes less reliable. In all probability, tattooed women who were sold as slaves in Athens came from small and not very stratified rural communities, subject to the depredations of native and/or foreign warrior elites. Closely connected to the Graeco-Macedonian and then Roman worlds, these elites shared many aesthetic codes with them, including the code of not being tattooed, among others.

Lower Nubia

There is evidence of another female tattooing tradition north of ancient Nubia. It has been observed on a dozen artificially or naturally mummified corpses: three women buried at Deir el-Bahari (Thebes, Upper Egypt), close to the funerary temple of Mentuhotep II (*circa* 2000 BCE), one at Hierakonpolis (*circa* 1800-1700 BCE), one at Kuban (*circa* 1500 BCE), one at



Deir el-Bahari-type concubine figurine. West Thebes, Egypt. Circa 1991-1797 BC. 12.2 x 49 cm. Siliceous faience Musée du Louvre, Paris. Inv. E10942.

Semna (Meroitic era, *circa* 250 BCE-350 AD), and at least six at Aksha (1st century AD). Most of these mummies have a recurrent motif, a lozenge formed by 16 (4 x 4) or 9 (3 x 3) dots. This dotted motif, which was possibly made using a comb with three or four teeth, shows that this tradition has remained uninterrupted for more than two millennia.

The oldest tattooed women grew up in small Nubian communities of farmers and livestock breeders, as attested to by the "C-Group" archaeological culture (*circa* 2200-1500 BCE)⁸. Several C-Group necropolises have yielded terracotta statuettes of women, marked by punctured lozenges representing tattoos. On some of them a double abdominal mutilation has even been depicted (a girdle of lozenges and profound scarification) also seen on the women buried at Thebes. These standardized mutilations correspond to nubility accession rites peculiar to the Nubians (if such rites had had precedence in Egypt, images and texts would have echoed them). The tattooed women buried at Deir el-Bahari were thus definitely of Nubian origin. They were brought back as booty after military campaigns,⁹ or else offered to the king of Egypt as part of matrimonial alliances made with Nubian chiefs. In both cases, they represented living trophies which, at the service of the king, increased his prestige. One of them, Amunet, had, among other titles, that of "priestess of Hathor". With the anonymous occupants of tombs 23 and 26, also tattooed, she might have belonged to a troupe of musicians and dancers responsible, based on the model of Hathor, for celebrating, satisfying and invigorating the king by way of music, dance and sexual display.¹⁰ The female effigies

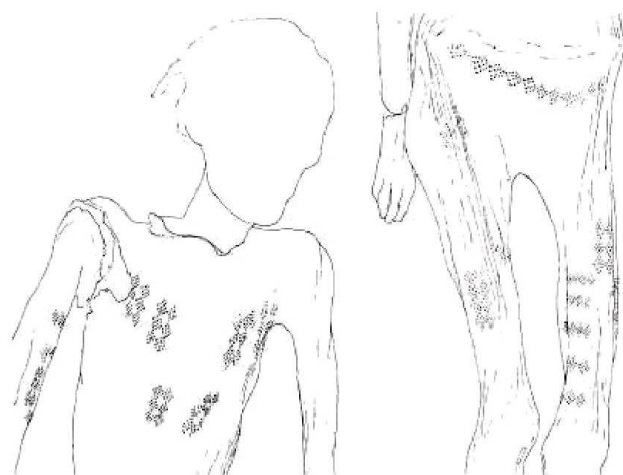
marked with tattoos in the Deir el-Bahari sector probably represented Nubian dancers and, by analogy with the royal model, their function would also have been to delight and invigorate the deceased.

ELITE TATTOOING

This was practiced by the semi-nomadic elites of Altai (central Asia) in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE (mummies kept in the frozen kourgans (tumuli) in the Pazyryk valley and the Ukok plateau). Its encompassing, body-covering zoomorphic and plant repertory was executed in a very elaborate style where curved lines bring to life stags, ibex, birds, fish and hybrid animals ("griffins"). The number of people whose tattoos have been described is now six (three men and three women).¹¹ The rich artefacts found in their tombs are hallmarked by a profusion of personal ornaments made of carved and gilded wood, leather, and felt. All belong to the two upper echelons of society, chiefs and warriors, engaged in a fierce competition involving, where both men and women were concerned, major investments in terms of personal display. This situation can be compared to the one having precedence in the Marquesas Islands and in New Zealand, in the period of the first contacts: there, tattooing was also body-covering, elaborate and mixed.

THERAPEUTIC AND PROPHYLACTIC TATTOOING

Everywhere ornamental tattooing is practiced we also find forms of therapeutic and/or prophylactic tattoos, consisting of small dots, lines and crosses, as on the mummies of Ötzi and Pazyryk (kourgan no.2) and Aksha (Nubia). Small surgical operations (puncture, scarification, tattooing, and cauterization) were ubiquitous in ancient and recent non-scholarly medicines. The operation was usually *loco dolenti*, in the site of the pain, or based on a supposed anatomical network to facilitate, divert or block the circulation of fluids deemed harmful or beneficial. Scholarly medicines (Graeco-Roman, Chinese, Arab-Moslem) which, for their part, favoured non-mutilating operations (scarification, punctures and superficial cauterizations), excluded tattooing from their therapeutic arsenal at a very early stage.¹²





Piece of mummified skin, right arm of a Pazyryk chief. Altaï, Pazyryk, Burial Mound 2, Russia. Early 3rd century B.C. 60 x 28 cm. Human skin, ink. Hermitage Museum, Saint-Petersburg.

OWNERSHIP TATTOOING

In the great state-run complexes of Antiquity, where tattooing was never promoted as an ornament (or even as an initiatory mark, as was long believed),¹³ it was used to notify a penal sanction or reproduce the name of an owner on the bodies of dependent people (prisoners and/or rationed workers). In the ancient Near East, sovereigns and scribes of large temples sometimes tattooed their labour force to prevent it being alienated or appropriated.¹⁴ The corollary of the tattooed mark was an archival piece deposited in a safe place. In the event of a dispute, the two documents—tattoo and written record—could be examined in front of witnesses.¹⁵ But in Greece and Rome, where different personal statuses were administered by means of archives backed up by a relatively effective coercive system, tattooing was never indispensable for managing the slave property.¹⁶

Customary tattooing, illustrated within slightly hierarchized societies (Thracian, Syrian and Arab tribes) casting roles and statuses on the basis of age and gender, did not survive in local authorities organized as kingdoms and States where there was a preference for certifications separated from the body, easier to inspect, as administrative data (civil status, contracts, judicial sentences...). The elite tattoos of the Asian steppes, for their part, demand a certain degree of hierarchization, and the existence of a stratum disputing access to power by investing in self-display and sumptuary exchanges. When power is differentiated and consolidated in a hereditary aristocracy and/or in a centralized State apparatus, and when population and territory both increase, it becomes futile to invest in personal display practices as restrictive as the tattoo. State and elites supporting it thus strive to discipline forms of personal display to stop them fuelling challenges to established authority: so excessive decor and luxury were condemned in clothing, but also, when it existed, in the practice of tattooing.¹⁷

Notes

- 1- Female because women tended to monopolize the body-covering decorative repertory, while men were limited to small therapeutic motifs, cf. Renault, 2008a.
- 2- Female tattooing referred to by pre-Islamic poets, cf. Montgomery, 1995.
- 3- Through this sole 5th century BCE reference: "tattoos shown on the faces of Moorish women" [Cassius Felix, *De Medicina*, 13, 1-2].
- 4- Lucian of Samosata, *The Syrian Goddess*, 59.
- 5- Field, 1958 (northern and southern Iraq).
- 6- Renault, 2011a.
- 7- Strabon, *Geography*, VII, 5, 4.
- 8- Anderson, 1996, p. 34-37 et 119.
- 9- In that period, Egypt conducted an active policy of control and/or association with the *C-Group* establishment on the southern border. Since the Ancient Empire, daughters of foreign dignitaries frequently swelled the ranks of secondary wives.
- 10- Morris, 2011.
- 11- Barkova, Pankova, 2005.
- 12- Renault, 2004, p. 102.
- 13- Renault, 2006 and 2008b.
- 14- In Egypt, in the 12th century BCE, in the neo-Babylonian and Persian world of the 7th and 6th centuries BCE.
- 15- Arnaud, 1973.
- 16- It only reappeared in the late 4th century BCE, when the Roman State decided to tattoo several of its agents, too often diverted from their posts, cf. Renault, 2011b.
- 17- For a long time this was the case in the Near East where there was a succession of prohibitions which all seemed alike: *Leviticus* 19, 28; Pseudo-Shenoute, *On Christian Behaviour*, ch. 14 & 20 and *Canons of Saint Basil*, 27 (Coptic prescriptions of the 5th and 6th centuries); *Hadiths of The Prophet* cursing tattooing and tattooed women.

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