

Psyche and human thought from the anatomies of the past

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To the Editor,

Our focus of study has consistently been directed towards anthropology of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This approach requires a thorough exploration of the works of the main figures in this discipline, namely the scholars who dedicated themselves to it. Among the most committed researchers in the field of biological anthropology of positivism of that time is certainly Abele De Blasio (1).

There are many of his studies in the criminalistic field, but we note how his investigative experience also grows thanks to the studies conducted on ancient mummies and osteological finds and therefore thanks to his passion for archeology and human history.

However, what truly defines De Blasio's research focus is his unwavering curiosity about humanity – both past and present. He places the individual, spanning across time, at the core of his inquiries, aiming to unravel the intricate interplay between anatomy and the human psyche. By delving into the realms of archaeology, anthropology, and history, De Blasio sought to elucidate the profound connection that binds the physical form and the complexities of the mind (2, 3).

This is also evident when examining ancient human remains. In fact, the author examined them through the anthropological skills of the time, i.e., external examinations, measurements, and calculation of anthropometric indices, etc.

The complexity of his observations is also evident from the study published in 1900 and titled *Mummies and Skulls of Ancient Peru* (4). In this paper, he reported the results of the macroscopical analysis of

some Peruvian mummies preserved in the museums of the University of Naples.

In particular, De Blasio analyzed an entire mummy from the Cordilleras two mummies, and five skulls of Bolivian origin.

Two very interesting aspects emerge from his investigation: artificial mummification in pre-Columbian cultures and cranial plastic deformation, topics that he dealt with after examining the finds.

The analyzes on the mummified finds at the time did not foresee the radiological approach, we are in fact only five years after the discovery of X-rays, and therefore the observations are exclusively carried out on the external examination of the integuments. De Blasio described the position obtained from the mummies for the embalmer's hand, or fetal and highlights the presence of tissue injuries especially at the level of the thorax and abdomen, in one case to extract the entrails and in another to insert ointments into the insides of the cavities. A particular mummy's cavities were filled with coca leaves.

It reconstructs the biological profile of the mummified individuals suggesting adult ages, one sample was close to 60 years of age, identifies male gender and hypothesizes the cause of death through the observation of a fracture in the fronto-spheno-parietal region in another subject.

Surely it is not easy to carry out a study on mummified finds without a tomographic examination, to identify whether or not there has been evisceration, on the products used to stop the putrefaction processes, etc. but in any case what is evident, as also reported by De Blasio, is that intentional mummification is always a reflection of beliefs and as the author

reports “that the inhabitants of that South American country had for one of the dogmas of religion, the universal resurrection [...] the priests of the Inca empire taught that man was composed of a soul (runa) and a body (allpacamasca), that the body formed of earth returned to the earth [...] and that the other life was, for them, no less corporal than the present”.

De Blasio’s interests in the fields of anthropology and archaeology extend beyond the anatomopathological analysis of various methods of mummification, encompassing both those with and without evisceration. He also devotes himself to investigating the cognitive effects related to practices such as cranial deformation.

In addition to the calculation of craniometric indices and the detection of cranial capacity as many other authors especially dedicated to biological anthropology inside the Natural Sciences (4), his observations focus on the plastic deformations attributed to these skulls.

He explained the intention of the “deformer” who obtained this particular “sugar loaf” shape by applying bandages wrapped around the newborn’s head.

He documented a sequence of research studies conducted by previous authors who had explored the issue of cranial deformation. Some of these researchers even asserted that such deformations were not artificially induced. For instance, Juan Ignacio De Armas faced strong criticism from the renowned Italian anthropologist Mantegazza, who remarked: “From this, we can infer the author’s pressing need to delve into anatomy and anthropology”. On the other hand, others, like Gosse, argued that these abnormalities could be inherited. Nicolucci, in his 1857 publication *Ethnological Essay Concerning Human Races*, also shared Gosse’s claims.

Certainly, also in this case, this type of transformation reflected a belief of the population of that time and to explain this De Blasio reported Ranke and his famous work “Man” in which he said that artificial bodily transformations were based on desire to be able to resemble the figure of the animal that served as their emblem.

It is clear that De Blasio’s interests managed to create strong connections between anthropology understood as a naturalistic and cultural science and his interest in the human psyche.

In this sense, within this study he questions whether this type of deformation could lead to cognitive problems.

De Blasio in various studies supported the close connection between the morphology of the skull and the psyche up to the point of associating delinquent types (5). This type of affirmation follows the Lombrosian anthropology of that time which reached its peak in craniological investigations with the identification of the median occipital dimple of Vilella’s skull (6).

It appears evident in this study that he claims that the artificial deformation pursued by the ancient populations of the Incas did not lead to “no defect of intelligence” and this type of deduction derived from the fact that museum collections contain many cases of cranial deformation. Populations would certainly not have, according to De Blasio, perpetuated this practice if it caused neurological problems.

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