

The (Not-So) Ancient Practice of Anatomical Trophy Taking: An Emphasis on Penile Dismemberment

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Introduction: Since the first known hieroglyphics showing the war trophy taking of the penis, the capacity of anatomical amputation has always been a nightmarish aspect of wars. War trophies were a prodigious aspect of war in preliterate societies and ancient Greece. Herodotus wrote that Scythian warriors would present to their king the heads of enemies to claim their share of plunder. We performed a literature search to identify instances of war-associated phallotomy in its historical perspective.

Sources: A review of the literature from primary military and secondary sources was undertaken to assess the aspects of warfare specific to trophy taken, its origins, and impact.

Results: Egyptian warriors were famed for collecting as many enemy phalluses as possible in the battle of Khesef-Tamahu. There is some evidence that they spared those enemies who were circumcised. Anthropological studies point to the practice of phallotomy in some indigenous peoples of the Americas. There are biblical accounts of phallotomy that specify foreskin status which themselves were also used for royal presentation. Phallotomy also appears to have been documented in African, Arabian, and Mesopotomian cultures but continued in some form into the Second World War.

Conclusions: The barbarity of war may be eclipsed by additional atrocities inflicted by victor over the defeated with the collection of anatomical relics. Such war ‘trophies’ included the penis as an ultimate attempt to humiliate the vanquished

Key Words: war, trophy taking, phallotomy, circumcision

Hippocrates wrote that “war is the only proper school for a surgeon” yet the same may not be said of the combatants.(1) Evidence of war is as old the record of humankind and suggests a certain inextricability of violence of one group of people over another. “War is hell”, as laconically stated by the American general William Tecumseh Sherman, but the hellish nature of military fighting may extend well beyond the time of battle and engagement.(2) (Figure 1) Post-bellum revenge violence may be among mankind’s most horrific and inexplicable components of war, and that of trophy taking, or the radical disfigurement of the vanquished, its most bestial.(3,4) The practice of human trophy collecting involves the appropriation of human remains. Following a massacre, warriors would return with heads or some other bodily part of their fallen enemy.(5,6) These trophies would bestow honor and prestige upon the victor; it provided an opportunity for revenge and was the ultimate display of dominance and power over the desecrated. Even if no trophy is taken,

mutilations were commonly inflicted upon victim’s corpses – features defaced, ears or eyes removed, abdomens splayed open, genitals severed. History is not lacking in such examples and this unique form of pillaging does not appear to be rare in the military record. The phallus appears to have had no protection against vindictive warriors.(7) We performed a study of documented instances of genital war trophy taking to identify historical patterns and frequency, and its human impact.

SOURCES

We used secondary literature on all aspects of warfare and trophy taking from the early period of recorded history to present. US military documents in the public domain, memoirs, and historiographies were analyzed. We catalogued published literature on phallotomy to identify anatomic variation in genital trophy taking and trends over time.

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Figure 1. Victim of wartime phallotomy from Abyssinian conflicts of the 1800s. (4)

RESULTS

Ancient Egypt

Circumcision may be one of the earliest documented surgical procedures known but we found that the hieroglyphic record of ancient Egypt reveals at least two prominent pharaohs, Merneptah (r. 1213-1203 BCE) and Ramses III (r. 1186-1155 BCE) also condoned or ordered phallus war trophy taking.(Figure 2) Ramses' soldiers collected thousands of penises following the battle of Kheseft-Tamahu.(8) These offerings are depicted on the walls of Medinet Habu Temple, where Ramses' subjects are seen laying enemy hands and penises at his feet. Even earlier, in the 19th dynasty, Merneptah waged war against a combined Libyan army and an invading horde of "Sea Peoples".(Figure3) Merneptah emerged victorious and, as was recorded in the Ahthribis Stele in the Cairo Museum, "the uncircumcised phalli from the slain Libyans were carried off...to the place where the king was totalling 6,111 men..."(8) Merneptah memorialized his victory with inscriptions in the walls of the Temple of Karnak, as well as on the Merneptah Stele, (ca. 1208 BCE).(9) In total, the Egyptians amassed a total of 13,240 severed penes and did not discriminate among rank or nation and included six from Libyan

generals; 222 from Sicilian warriors; 542 from Etruscan warriors; 6,111 from Greeks; and 6,359 from Libyan soldiers.(10)

The Narmer Palette, from an even earlier period of Egypt, from the 31st century BCE, or 5,000 years ago, during the reign of the king Narmer, shows two rows of decapitated and bound enemies, with their genitalia placed on their heads.(11)(Figure 4) This detail depicts a victory celebration and scholars have described the scene as the "aftermath of an act of punishment, the execution and deliberate humiliation of enemy prisoners, decapitated and emasculated"; the severed phalli are displayed prominently as a way to "heap insult upon injury" to the slain enemies.(11,12)

Violence in the Old Testament

The historical record of the Middle East is reflected in Old Testament authors including Samuel who documented some of the important military events of the early Israelites and constitutes what is referred to as the Deuteronomistic history of the 6th century BCE.(13) In one account, Saul offers his daughter to David for marriage in exchange for 100 Philistine foreskins, whereby David delivers twice what is required. "David arose and went, he and his men, and slew of the Philistines two hundred men; and David brought their foreskins, and they gave them in full tale to the king, that he might be the king's son in law. And Saul gave him Michal his daughter to wife." (Samuel 18:27) Biblical scholars have argued that "foreskin" was a mistranslation and refers to the entire penis.(14)

African, Arabian, & Assyrian Acquisitions

Female warriors of the African kingdom Dahomey brought back male genitalia to the king as war trophies. The mother of the Islamic ruler, Mu'awiya (r. 661- 680 CE), encouraged her supporters to slash the foreskins and genitals from their foes. To avenge the death of her father, she "hacked off [his killer's] penis and testicles, and strung them around her neck".(15) In a record of Assyrian torture and war tactics, the practice of tearing off enemy genitals and testicles borrowed from the agrarian lexicon. "With the bodies of their warriors, I filled the plain, like grass. [Their] testicles I cut off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of cucumbers."(16)

The Americas

There is evidence that trophy taking involving the scalp



Figure 2. Hieroglyphics showing a ritualistic circumcision (from Cox et al. 14)

was practiced in both the Old and New World, the latter by both native and non-native peoples, even up to the 19th century. In one infamous episode known as the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, Colonel John Chivington led the 3rd Colorado Cavalry of the United States Army in an unprovoked attack on Cheyenne and Arapaho villagers, murdering nearly 200 women, children, and older men. "Fingers and ears were cut off the bodies for the jewelry they carried" wrote one historian, while the body of Cheyenne Chief White Antelope was specifically targeted. In addition to being scalped, the soldiers "cut off his nose, ears, and testicles - the last (used) for a tobacco pouch."(17)

In South America, two Incan chiefdoms were known to "cut off an enemy's penis", exhibiting it on the roadside to shame their foes.(18) In an early 20th account, English writer Thomas Whiffen, described second hand reports of the supposed Amazonian custom of wartime anthropophagy as an extreme form of extreme insult inflicted upon the enemy. "When a feast is to take place, the prisoners are knocked down and despatched, their heads removed to be danced with and eventually dried as trophies. The body is then divided and shared amongst the feasters. Only

the legs and arms...are eaten ceremoniously. Anything like the brains, the intestines and so forth are regarded as filthy and never touched, nor is the trunk eaten. The male genital organs are given to the wife of the chief, the only female who has any share in the feast."(5)

Modern Warfare

Although not as common an occurrence, trophy-taking appears to have persisted into the modern era. World War II memoirist E.B. Sledge described graphic tales of body mutilation of fallen soldiers who had their dismembered phallus placed in the victim's oral cavity. (7) Such sordid details were also documented on all sides during the Vietnam War. One veteran recalled a case where the "(victim) was dragged into the village where he was beaten... and executed... The usual surgery was performed on his genitals, which were then stuffed into his mouth."(19)

DISCUSSION

We found evidence that the war time trophy taking of the penis has existed as long as war has been described,



Figure 3. (Left) Hieroglyphics on the Medinet Habu Temple, Luxor Governorate, Egypt, showing offerings of enemy penii to Pharaoh Ramses III after that battle of Kheseft-Tamahu. (Right) Enlarged view (From Billington B, 2013 (22))

spanning 5000 years from the earliest Egyptian cultures to the modern era.(20) Trophy taking is rooted in personal efficacy, power, or status, is linked to intimidating one's adversaries, and perpetuates the act of revenge.(6)

The barbarity of war and the atrocities inflicted by one combatant over another reaches its nadir with the collection of anatomical relics. These almost inconceivable acts included the penis as an ultimate attempt to humiliate the conquered, a kind of macabre memento mori. The brutality of corpse defilement was ultimately outlawed by the 3rd article of the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and articles following the end of the Second World War.(21)

Defilement by phallotomy does deserve an altogether different connotation and categorization of the *memento mori*. Phallotomy would imply an intent far more than trophy taking, as a ritualized attack on a defining element of the conquered. There is some evidence, however, that very early war cultures may have collected penises as a physical accountability of the dead since, presumably, one could obtain more than one finger or toe and only one phallus from a single victim(8). The phallus also provided the physical basis for remuneration by tribal leaders, clan members or kings. The penis, as a symbol of virility and power, was, as a war trophy, more symbolic than the head, the ears, or the hands. In the long and violent history of warfare, the practice of phallotomy played a recurring and central role as a particularly ghastly *memento mori*.

CONCLUSION

War trophy taking especially of the phallus has been documented in ancient and modern cultures. The act of trophy taking is a war time atrocity rooted in revenge violence and subjugation perhaps brought to its brutal nadir by the practice of phallotomy.

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Figure 4. Narmer Palette (left) and magnified section (right) portraying a victory celebration with depictions of decapitated, bound, and slain enemies, with their genitalia placed on their heads (from Mark JJ (20)).