

Boscastle Head, Harriet

Impact ID: IMP00024

Institution: Museum of Witchcraft

Designation: 343

Date of Acquisition: 1951

Contact: Dr. Martin Smith

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Image Modality: CT

Country: Egypt

Dig Site:

Time Period: Late Period

Dynasty:

Date: 695-234 BC

Sex: Female

Age: 25-35 years old



Figure 1. Boscastle Head

Background:

The cranium was found in a Bible box amongst the rubble of a London church after being bombed in the Second World War (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). A not from a previous curator of the museum, now deceased, claims it is the head of a medieval execution victim (Smith et al., 2011). A priest is then said to have put the head in a carved oak bible box and placed it under the altar of the church (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). While cleaning up the rubble, the head and box were rejected by the church, consequently passing through numerous owners and amounting stories about its background (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). When Cecil Williamson, founder of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, placed the skull in the collection he stated the dark tar resulted from the skull head being chopped off and thrown into a witch's cauldron, making it perfect for the theme of the museum (Smith et al., 2011).

In 2009-2010, the current curators of the museum lent the cranium and the box to Smith and colleagues (2011) for the first scientific investigation to be carried out on them. Until the CT

and x-ray examinations by Dr. Martin Smith of Bournemouth University, and colleagues, the head was thought to be from a male, but it is actually a female (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). After the examinations, it is believed the head actually belongs to a mummy that dates to the Late Period of Ancient Egypt, and was not cut off a living human by a group of witches (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). However, the skull is still possible to be a relic of a Christian saint or Protestant or Catholic martyr (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). The carvings on the box are similar to the 17th century chapbooks (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). Lateral scratches on the bottom of the box match the story of it being kept on a rough surface and consistently being pulled forward for observation of the relic in the box (Smith et al., 2011).

The shaved hair can be explained through wearing wigs, common in the 1600s, or at times it was common for people being publicly punished that would have their hair shaved off (Smith et al., 2011). Tar can also be seen in the preservation of body parts of criminals on display to the public (Smith et al., 2011). Some have proposed it may be a sideshow mummy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created for maximum levels of interest for the sideshow (Smith et al., 2011). Some believe it may be the head of an Egyptian mummy, but the tar appears to have been applied after the decapitation, which is very unlikely to be seen in ancient mummies (Smith et al., 2011).

Pathological Features:

This skull is covered in a dark, tar-like substance with uneven preservation of soft tissues across the skull and missing the mandible and other neck structures completely (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017; Smith et al., 2011). The mid-facial region and palate have no preserved soft tissue, while the orbits have completely preserved all soft tissues (Smith et al., 2011). The eyes are preserved but flattened with eyelids intact (Smith et al., 2011). The scalp is preserved but some areas are flaking and exposing the frontal bone (Smith et al., 2011). Some hair is preserved but is only 1-2mm long and pale in pigmentation from the loss of melanin (Smith et al., 2011).

Many of the cranial features that are used to diagnose sex are completely exposed and all resemble female patterns (Smith et al., 2011). However, it is possible to have belonged to a gracile male as the skull is not the most reliable for sex diagnosis (Smith et al., 2011). Dentition was used for age estimation. All teeth have erupted except the third molars, which typically erupt between 17-21 years old, but the severe wear on the teeth was inconsistent with the young age (Smith et al., 2011). However, the CT examination showed the third molars just never formed, meaning the individual is most likely much older (Smith et al., 2011). Many of the anterior teeth are broken post-mortem, likely from falling on a hard, flat surface (Smith et al., 2011). On the remaining teeth, no caries are visible and there's varying levels of wear on each tooth (Smith et al., 2011). Considerable amounts of dentine are exposed in the molars, with more on the left side (Smith et al., 2011). Using the wear patterns as a diagnostic method for age, it is most likely that the individual is 25-35 years old, but its possible she is older if she's from a population with higher levels of dental wear (Smith et al., 2011). Ancestral facial features are consistent with Caucasoid origin (Smith et al., 2011). These features are broad range of Old World populations

as well including India, Ireland, Norway, and North Africa (Smith et al., 2011). Molar agenesis is particularly common in Ancient Egyptian and Nubian populations and is most common in females (Smith et al., 2011).

The maxillary teeth are badly damaged, especially the anterior portion. The CT examination revealed resin poured into the back of the cranial vault, similar to that seen in mummies of ancient Egypt (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2017). By examining the CT results, the skull aligns more with purposeful Ancient Egyptian mummification rather than that of medieval execution victims (Smith et al., 2011). The material in the back of the cranial vault closely resembles that of homogenous resin-like substance compared to desiccated brain matter (Smith et al., 2011). CT examinations also show the mandible was snapped off, leaving fractured ends under the tar like substance, meaning it was broken off before or during the embalming process (Smith et al., 2011). FTIR analyses of the tar-like material confirmed it was of organic origin and most likely a wood resin derived from the coniferous tree (Smith et al., 2011). The resin also appears to have been added in two different pouring events with resin in the occipital region and resin in the skull base (Smith et al., 2011).

Microscopic examination of the linen sample on the back of the skull resembles the same patterns of those used on Ancient Egyptian wrappings (Smith et al., 2011). Dating of the linen wrappings resulted in 2165 ± 30 BP, this would place the head from the Ptolemaic Period (Smith et al., 2011). Egyptians were also known to wear wigs, although this was on the decline by the Ptolemaic Period, elites among the Egyptian and North African societies were still depicted wearing them (Smith et al., 2011).

References

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. 2017. Accessed August 15, 2018.

<http://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/object/head-box-skull-box/>

Smith, M.J., Kneller, P., Elliot, D., Young, C., Manley, H., and Osselton, D. 2011.

Multidisciplinary analysis of a mummified cranium claimed to be that of a medieval execution victim. *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*. 4(1): 75-89.

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