

CHAPTER VII
ARTIFICIAL CRANIAL DEFORMATION IN
POLYNESIA AND NEW ZEALAND

WE have seen how the practice of artificially deforming the head is common in Melanesia and apparently rare in Micronesia. We have to consider the same custom as it occurs in the Polynesian Islands. There seems little doubt that the custom, here almost universal,¹ is of some considerable antiquity. It may be found convenient to begin with Hawaii and then work southwards and eastwards. In Hawaii the natives have unusual flattening of the occiput and popular opinion ascribes this form to the way mothers hold their children, supporting the backs of their heads with their left hands. Although we may pass over this popular explanation, there would seem to be little doubt that in certain instances at least an intentional flattening is designed. The head of the infant when lying on its back is laid in the hard shell of a gourd, and this custom of allowing the head to rest upon some hard surface is often retained by Hawaiians when they are grown up. Men have their hair cropped short behind in order to expose the occiput, and flatness and breadth at the back of the head are esteemed more highly than height in the forehead.² In Samoa a more severe form of deformation has been observed. During the first few days after the birth of the child, the mother, or one of the female relatives, pays great attention to the head of the infant in order to attempt to give it that form which is consistent with current Samoan ideals of beauty. The child is laid on its back and the next step is to obtain three flat stones. One is placed close to the crown of the head and the other two at either side, whilst the forehead is forced down in order to flatten it and the nose also receives a similar compression. Samoans regard the noses of white men as shaped like canoes and in their estimation this

¹ See Linton, p. 59.

² See Cheever, p. 81.

constitutes a serious blemish.³ Sometimes four stones are employed, or pieces of rock called *atā* are taken from the river bed and used to surround the head. The stones are often wrapped up in cloth to prevent them from actually touching the head of the child and when more than three are used the fourth is placed immediately under the occiput. A brachycephalic orthognathous head is very greatly admired, and when ridiculing a person without such an advantage, the expression is often heard, "What a wedge-shaped head that fellow has got! hasn't he had a mother who shaped his head for him?"⁴

Nowadays the custom is dying out, although it still obtains in Eastern Upolu. A simple manual moulding by old women is being substituted for the stones, and the young people usually regard it with disdain and disapproval, the ideas of beauty moving with the times.⁵

It is not in all the islands, however, that the admired shape is the same. In Niue, Buck collected a skull which had belonged to a well-known *patu* or elder, in which the occipital flattening was so marked as to give a C.I. of 96.3, and there would seem to be little doubt that the skull was not exceptional.⁶ Forms vary according to each group. In some the sides of the head are squeezed to flatten them and cause an elongation upwards: in others, the crown of the head is pressed down so that the parietals splay outwards.⁷ This latter method was one which formerly was much favoured in Tonga. In olden days, and perhaps to a certain extent still, the Tongan child used to be laid upon a piece of *tapa*, with the top of its head well pressed up against a heavy square chunk of wood. But the deformation most commonly observed to-day is not of that type. It generally consists of pronounced occipital flattening, and in a considerable percentage of skulls asymmetry is found to be present. With the single exception of one cranium belonging to a young child, all the material brought in by E. W. Gifford and W. C. McKern shows this flattening, the average length-breadth index being 86.8. Hard supports and wooden pillows are in constant use among the Tongans, and it would seem possible

³ G. Turner, 1, p. 175; G. Turner, 2, pp. 79-80; Kurze, p. 18; Krämer, 1, vol. II, pp. 53-54.

⁴ Kubary, 2, in Schmeltz and Krause, p. 472: cf. Kubary, 3, p. 71.

⁵ Andrew Thomson, p. 370.

⁶ Buck, 1, p. 149.

⁷ Pritchard, pp. 427-428.

that these may be held responsible for the flattening, so it would appear that the deformation is due to accidental factors. It is of course possible that the flat occiput may be considered elegant and so the use of hard head-rests was continued in order to ensure the persistence of this feature.⁸

Similarly, in Tahiti an artificial flattening of the occiput was noticed by Scherzer during the long cruise of the *Novara*⁹ and other authors report how children's heads are pressed and flattened from birth in order to make them high. The nose also is flattened and the expression "long nose" is one of contempt.¹⁰ Moreover, in boys the forehead and back of the head are pressed upwards, and this custom is supposed to shape the child's head in such a way that it may strike terror in the hearts of his enemies when he is old enough to meet them.¹¹

Again in the Marquesas Islands, where bodily manipulations are much in vogue, many of them being of an extraordinary character, the heads of the children are moulded by being pressed on the forehead in order, if possible, to form a narrow temporal region and a head sloping back from the brows. Amongst many of the older natives the results of these attempts at deformation are said to be apparent, but the origin of the custom appears to be lost, and I have not come across any native traditions concerning it.¹²

We have seen above that cranial deformation is common in the Torres Straits, although it does not seem to have penetrated southward into Australia, or, if it ever did so, the fact has been lost and no definite traces appear to remain. Again in New Zealand, we have no definite example, as far as I have been able to discover of actual intentional cranial deformation. It is true that after birth the child is shaken to rid it of secretions and then the midwife proceeds to press the child's head between the palms of her hands in order, it is said, "to cause the head to assume a symmetrical form and to prevent the child from being big-headed." The nose is also pressed to flatten it and Best records the fact that several times he has laid a lead pencil across the nose of a native child and has observed that the ends of the pencil touch the

⁸ See Sullivan, 2, p. 247; Linton, p. 59. For Futuna see A. Hingston, in *Women, &c.*, vol. I, p. 87.

⁹ Scherzer, vol. III, p. 220.

¹⁰ King and Fitzroy, vol. II, p. 527.

¹¹ W. Ellis, 1, vol. I, p. 261: *cf.* Broca, 2, pp. 201 *ff.*

¹² Handy, p. 75.

face on both sides of the nose.¹³ This is no actual deformation however, since there is little evidence that the moulding is carried over protracted periods, and indeed Buck declares that he has been unable to gain any authentic information as to the existence of artificial shaping of the head in New Zealand.¹⁴ He recognizes however that the bodies of children are massaged and their noses manipulated, quoting a saying which is common among one of the tribes and which runs thus:—

Totoia nga waewae o to tamahine, kia pai ai te haere i nga parae o Manutuke,

which means "Stretch the lower limbs of your daughter that she may walk with grace along the level flats of Manutuke."¹⁵

It has been thought in some quarters that artificial deformation of the frontal region has been practised in the Chatham Islands. J. B. Davis noticed a depression of the frontal bone in two Moriori skulls¹⁶ but Scott when remarking on the same depression does not attribute it to artificial deformation and he examined nearly fifty specimens.¹⁷ Giuffrida-Ruggeri recently raised the same question and came to the conclusion that the Moriori skulls were artificially deformed,¹⁸ an opinion combated by Pearson who maintained that the skulls were normal and that artificial methods had played no part in distorting them.¹⁹

In the above notes on artificial cranial deformation as carried out in Polynesia, it will be observed that as we proceed eastwards the custom becomes less definite and the methods more inefficient until when New Zealand, which was the latest island to receive its culture, is reached only the merest traces remain. This is, I think, what we should expect if we accept the hypothesis that the custom has been introduced from without, possibly from some centre or centres lying to the west of this region. However that may be, and the evidence at present may not seem to be sufficient for a final decision, it is clear from what we have seen above that the custom of cranial deformation can be traced in Indonesia, Melanesia and Polynesia and that in many cases the methods employed are precisely the same although found in widely separated areas.

¹³ Best, 1, vol. XVI, p. 8: *cf.* Best, 2, vol. II, p. 24.

¹⁴ Buck, 1, p. 146.

¹⁶ Welch & Davis, p. cv.

¹⁸ Giuffrida-Ruggeri, 2.

¹⁵ Buck, 2, p. 28: *cf.* Polack, vol. I, p. 48.

¹⁷ Scott.

¹⁹ Pearson, p. 342: *cf.* H. D. Skinner.

PLATE XXVIII.

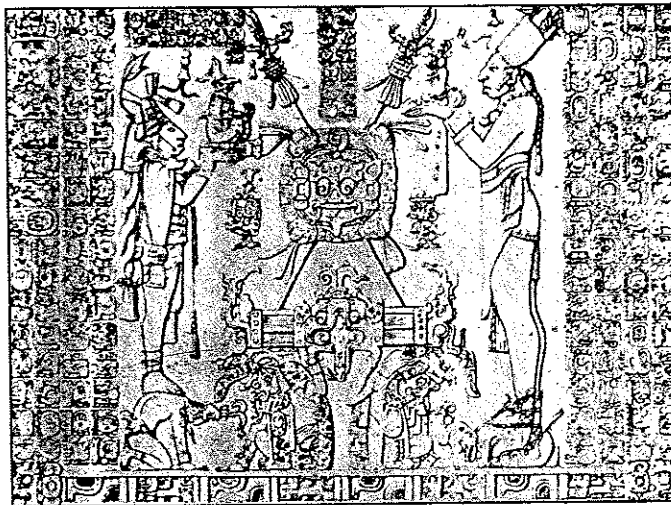


After

Maudslay.

a

Lintel 15 from Menché.



After

Maudslay.

b

Tablet from Palenque.