

Early depictions of the human anterior nasal septum*

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SUMMARY

In the literature, remarks on the depiction of the anterior nasal septum in prehistoric times cannot be found. Studying works of art from some archaeological sites of Asia, Asia Minor, Near East, Egypt, and Southeastern Europe the anatomical depiction of the columella and the nostrils in human figures are shown. These figures or heads, partly appearing as masks, were made of ivory, stone, marble, terracotta, steatite, reeds and clay, or of burned limestone. Faces and figures sculpted in the time between the Upper Palaeolithic (30,000 – 25,000 BC) and the Early Bronze Age (3,300 – 2,400 BC) are presented as examples of our ancestors' outstanding skill to create works of art with an astonishing ability to observe anatomical details. The tendency to create a human nose in a natural manner can already be recognized in the figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic.

Key words: art, nasal septum, nostrils, prehistoric, sculpture

INTRODUCTION

When we try to study early documents of how *Homo sapiens* depicted the human body and in particularly the face we cannot expect to find more than a few accidentally detected artefacts made of materials, which have withstood natural decay. Insofar as the term 'early' is only a very relative epithet to describe periods in the sequence of our ancestors, this paper presents some examples of faces with noses showing the anterior nasal septum and the nostrils sculpted in the time between the Upper Palaeolithic (30,000 – 25,000 BC) and the Early Bronze Age (3,300 – 2,400 BC).

Upper Palaeolithic

Human bones and artefacts of the Upper Palaeolithic, the time of the Crô-Magnon Man, were not only found in Europe (Departement Dordogne/France; Dolní Vestonice/Czechia, Grimaldi cavity/Riviera, Petersfels-cavity/South Germany) but also in Siberia [1]. A female figurine made of ivory from Malta in Siberia is dated to 30,000 – 25,000 BC (Figure 1). The face presents eyes, a slightly open mouth and a nicely elaborated nose with a columella, nostrils and symmetrical alae.

Another facial depiction from the Upper Palaeolithic was found in Dolní Vestonice/Czechia in 1936. A female head (H 4.8 cm) with head-gear carved of mammoth ivory, shows eyes with pupils and a long, slightly saddled nose with nostrils and a small columella [2].

Neolithic

Taking a great leap forward to the Neolithic (8,000 – 4,500 BC) we are in the time from which the first urban settlements in Anatolia and the ancient Levant have been excavated by archaeologists. The ancient Levant, with the regions of the modern West Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, had been one of the main commercial and cultural crossroads of antiquity connecting Anatolia to the North, Mesopotamia to the East, Egypt to the south and Cyprus and the Aegean to the West. In the Neolithic we differentiate a Pre-Pottery phase from the Pottery phase which started around 6,000 BC. In the following Chalcolithic period copper tools were used as well as to stone (4,500 - 3,300 BC). With the use of bronze tools we enter the period of Bronze Age from 3,300 to 1,200 BC.



The figures from 'Ain Ghazal (meaning: source of gazelles) in Jordan, dated to 6,700 to 6,500 BC, are among the most ancient monumental statues in the world. More than thirty statues are preserved, varying

Figure 1. Ivory figurine from Malta/Siberia (from Jelinek [1]).

in size from small busts to almost life-sized figures. The Neolithic artists made the figures by first constructing a reed framework for the separate parts of the body, then joining them with twine, and finally modelling the whole with a light, almost white mixture of burnt limestone and clay [3]. Figure 2 shows the head of a statue (H 104 cm) displayed in the Louvre. The large and wide-spread eyes with almond-shaped inlaid pupils and eye lids were created by fine lines of bitumen. The fine noses present with oval or slit-like nostrils enclosing a small columella and the small mouth presents without any accentuation of the lips. A few heads also show simple ears.



Figure 2. Face from 'Ain Ghazal, ca. 6,500 BC, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Another way of 'reconstructing' noses in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic was found in ancient Jericho where the skull of a deceased person was moulded with plaster to recreate the features as visible in the skull from the Jericho-B-period (6,500 BC) on display in the Rockefeller Institute at Jerusalem (Figure 3). The columella and nostrils are modelled with plaster of Paris.



Figure 3. Skull moulded with plaster from Jericho, ca. 6,500 BC, Rockefeller Institute, Jerusalem.



Figure 4. Head from Çatal Hüyük, (courtesy of Anatolian Museum, Ankara).



Figure 5. Anthropomorphic cup from Çatal Hüyük, 6,700 - 5,900 BC.

The most important Late Neolithic centre of Anatolia was Çatal Hüyük in the Konya Plain/Turkey where a round head was excavated (Figure 4). Only a little carving sufficed to turn a roundish stone into a human head with eyes, a mouth and a nose (diameter ca. 8 cm). The thin columella is enclosed by two larger oval-shaped nostrils (Anatolian Museum, Ankara).

The earliest pottery seems to come from Anatolia, probably around 6,500 BC [4]. In the Anatolian Museum at Ankara a pottery cup in form of a female head is on display which originates from the same excavation site in Çatal Hüyük. As one of the first examples of the anthropomorphic cups in the Late Neolithic, it is dated to 6,700 - 5,900 BC. In the detail of Figure 5, we look from above through the mouth of the cup into the vessel. The small nose is represented by the nasal lobule, viewed from the base, with a fine triangular columella and two almond-shaped nostrils placed directly on the mouth of the cup. The nose is flanked by two eyes on the body of the vessel.

In the middle of the Greek mainland, in Otzaki-Magula/Thessalia, an Early Neolithic bust of a woman (H 9.5 cm) was found made of terracotta and dated to 6,000 - 5,000 BC (Figure 6). A huge deviated nose with a thin columella and large nostrils dominates the head without ears and with coffee-bean-shaped eyes. Even the anterior part of the nasal septum is visible (Archaeological Museum, Larissa).

North of Greece, in Central Bulgaria, a vase from Tell Azmak was excavated belonging to the Karanova I civilisation and is



Figure 6. Woman's bust from Thessalia, 6,000 - 5,000 BC (from [5]).



Figure 7. Vase from Tell Azmak, ca. 6,000 BC (from [6]).

dated to ca. 6,000 BC (Figure 7). A horned head associated with snakes on the front of this vase is shown in relief. In addition to the anterior septum and slit-like nostrils, sculpted eyebrows on this Neolithic vase catch our attention [6].

A couple of clay statues with a black-brown coat were found together in a grave of the cemetery at Cernovoda in Romania, dated to 5,000 - 4,800 BC. The man and woman both have mask-like faces with closed eyes, small open mouths and long tube-line noses with little roundish nostrils enclosing a columella. Figure 8 shows the rather obese seated woman with the epithet 'Great Goddess of Hamangia', while the seated man is known under the 'Thinker of Hamangia' (National Museum, Bucharest).



Figure 8. Great Goddess of Hamangia, 5,000 - 4,800 BC (from [7]).



Figure 9. Pottery mask from Bet Shemesh, 4,000 - 3,000 BC, Rockefeller Institute, Jerusalem.

Chalcolithic

A Chalcolithic pottery mask from Bet Shemesh/Israel is displayed in the Rockefeller Institute at Jerusalem, dated to 4,000 - 3,000 BC. Large round eyes under prominent eyebrows flank a small nasal pyramid which widens to a real nasal lobule with a short columella and small asymmetric nostrils (Figure 9). The oversized malar bones correspond to a mighty chin below an oblique open mouth. The frontal region is perforated for attachments.

A Chalcolithic cross-shaped idol, made of steatite, was found in Souskiou near Paphos on Cyprus (Figure 10). The pendant (H 8 cm) is dated to 3,500 - 2,500 BC. The round mask-like face presents with eyes, a mouth and a tiny nasal lobule with a columella between the round nostrils (Akademisches Kunstmuseum der Universität, Bonn).



Figure 10. Pendant from Souskiou, 3,500 - 2,500 BC (from [8]).



Figure 11. Lady of Uruk, 3,500 - 3,250 BC (from [9]).

In the extreme south of Mesopotamia the first Sumerian city-states emerged in the 4th millenium BC with an elaborate skill to produce works of art of marble and alabaster. This mask of white marble, dated to 3,500 - 3,250 BC and known as "The Lady of Uruk or Warka" (H 20.1 cm) is the first life-size depiction of the portrait of a woman (Figure 11). Although the nasal pyramid is markedly damaged, both columella and nostrils can be recognized (Baghdad Iraq Museum).

Ancient Egypt

Our short excursion ends in Ancient Egypt. Archaeologists consider the partly painted terracotta head from Merimda near Cairo (Figure 12) as the earliest depiction of a human face in ancient Egypt. The almost egg-shaped sculpture (H 10.3 cm) is dated to about 4,000 BC and displayed in the Egyptian Museum at Cairo. Orbital cavities, nostrils and open mouth are symmetrically arranged along a medial axis. The rather natural columella bridges the straight nasal dorsum and the upper lip.

Dating to the 1st dynasty, a slate palette also preserved in the Egyptian Museum at Cairo commemorates a victory of King



Figure 12. Head from Merimda, ca. 4,000 BC, Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Narmer about 3,000 BC. On the reverse side of the palette (detail in Figure 13 with H of 30 cm), the falcon of Horus grasps in one talon a cord attached to a nose-ring of a prisoner's severed head. Perching with the other talon on six papyri shoots, it symbolizes the subjugation of Lower Egypt to Upper Egypt and is the earliest depiction of a nose-ring in a septal perforation that we could find.

Finally let us move into the 4th dynasty. Realism in the visual arts is exemplified by the almost portrait-like faces with

natural noses encountered in the limestone statue of Prince Rahotep and his wife Nofret in the tomb at Medum/Egypt (2,620 BC) (detail of Figure 14 with H ca. 55 cm).

CONCLUSION

The faces selected for this paper were made of different materials and vary in size from a few cm to almost life-size. The oldest figurine from Malta/Siberia was carved of ivory. In the Pre-Pottery Neolithic the remarkably well preserved life-sized figures from 'Ain Ghazal were constructed by reeds, twine, clay and burned limestone. After the invention of pottery by 6,500 BC artists also created works of art made of terracotta as well as of ivory and stone. Since the Chalcolithic period faces and figures made of marble, alabaster, slate and steatite have also been excavated.

In addition to the nasal details, the ancient artist depicted other anatomical details such as facial hair, ears some of which are pierced, eyebrows, eyes replaced by Kauri snails, pupils and conjunctiva, the mouth and piercing of the lower lip, and skin replaced by clay or plaster.



Figure 13. Part of the Narmer palette, ca. 3,000 BC, Egyptian Museum, Cairo.



Figure 14. Rahotep and Nofret from Medum

These few examples of faces and figures sculpted in the time between the Upper Palaeolithic (30,000 – 25,000 BC) and the Early Bronze Age (3,300 – 2,400 BC) are outstanding examples of our ancestors' artistic skill combined with an astonishing ability to observe anatomical details including a natural rendition of the human nose.

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