

# DRAWING WITH GREAT NEEDLES

Ancient Tattoo Traditions of North America

*Edited by* AARON DETER-WOLF *and* CAROL DIAZ-GRANADOS



"This volume thoroughly presents the ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources on tattooing and also shows the power of systematic iconographic analyses when coupled with historical information. It also nicely addresses the problems of exploring tattooing from an archaeological perspective. . . . It will make an important contribution to our continued efforts to understand Native American societies in both the recent and the deep past."

—ADAM KING, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SOUTH CAROLINA INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

For thousands of years, Native Americans throughout the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains used the physical act and visual language of tattooing to construct and reinforce the identity of individuals and their place within society and the cosmos. The act of tattooing served as a rite of passage and supplication, while the composition and use of ancestral tattoo bundles was intimately related to group identity. The resulting symbols and imagery inscribed on the body held important social, civil, military, and ritual connotations within Native American society. Yet despite the cultural importance that tattooing held for prehistoric and early historic Native Americans, modern scholars have only recently begun to consider the implications of ancient Native American tattooing and assign tattooed symbols the same significance as imagery inscribed on pottery, shell, copper, and stone.

*Drawing with Great Needles* is the first book-length scholarly examination into the antiquity, meaning, and significance of Native American tattooing in the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains. The contributors use a variety of approaches, including ethnohistorical and ethnographic accounts, ancient art, evidence of tattooing in the archaeological record, historic portraiture, tattoo tools and toolkits, gender roles, and the meanings that specific tattoos held for Dhegiha Sioux and other Native speakers, to examine Native American tattoo traditions. Their findings add an important new dimension to our understanding of ancient and early historic Native American society in the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains.

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## Drawing with Great Needles: Ancient Tattoo Traditions of North America

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*Reviewed by: Jonathan E. Reyman, Curator of Anthropology,  
Illinois State Museum.*

Tattooing is a worldwide phenomenon which has been practiced for millennia, as demonstrated once again by the September 1991 find of Ötzi in the Ötztal Alps, on the border between Austria and Italy. Ötzi dates to about 3,300 BCE but is by no means the earliest tattooed man.

Although tattooing has been present among Euro-Americans for centuries, tattooing occurred much earlier among Native Americans in both North and South America and was remarked upon by early European explorers—who often confused it with painting and other less permanent forms of body decoration. Yet until this volume, relatively little has been published about this important cultural practice among the native peoples of the New World.

Let me begin with a caveat: despite the subtitle, this volume **does not** cover all of native North America. It is based on a symposium, “Tattooing and Body Modification in the Pre-historic and Early Historic Southeast,” held at the 2009 meeting at the Southeast Archaeological Conference, chaired by the senior editor. Thus coverage focuses primarily on peoples of the Southeastern culture area, somewhat idiosyncratically defined by **Antoinette Wallace** (p. 2) in her opening chapter as “bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, on the south by the Gulf of Mexico, on the west by the dry country of Texas and the Plains, and on the north by the colder climate areas of the Upper Mississippi and Ohio Rivers of the Midwest,” with chapters on eastern Plains, pre-contact Mississippian, and Northern Woodlands peoples. Thus, this symposium volume excludes the ancient tattooed peoples of the American Southwest, the ethnographically documented tattooed peoples of the western Plains, Great Basin, California, and especially those of the Northwest Coast, the northernmost Woodlands, and the Arctic—although Benjamin Steere’s Chapter 3, “Sand Creek Paddle Designs as Tattoos,” takes a useful cross-cultural detour to discuss, briefly, pottery and tattooing motifs in Africa, Brazil, Borneo, and Polynesia. Nevertheless, readers interested in Native American tattooing and other forms of body decoration will find much of interest and food for thought in this volume.

Another point at the outset: from the book’s title, *Tattooing with Great Needles*, the reader might think the needles in question are large. They’re not; in fact, tattooing, scarification, piercing, and other needles are generally small implements such as the Cherokee scarifier and possible tattoo tool pictured here.



*Cherokee scarifier, ca. 1950, made by Lloyd Runningwolf Sequogah (deceased and given to Raymond D. Fogelson. 4.8cm x 4.6cm. Made from 7 turkey bone needles framed by and thrust through the quill and rachis of a wild turkey wing feather, wrapped with cordage. Illinois State Museum Collection.)*

Rather, “Great Needles” apparently refers to the power and significance of the designs that are inscribed by the needles. “Great Needles” are great because of the greatness of the design motifs they place on and in the individual.

In Chapter XIII of *Structural Anthropology* (1963), Lévi-Strauss makes several important statements directly relevant to *Drawing with Great Needles* as a whole but, curiously, his work is not cited by any of the authors, though several speak directly to the issues Lévi-Strauss raises. First, Lévi-Strauss (Anchor Books edition, 1967, p. 255) states, “Structure modifies decoration, but decoration is the final cause of structure, which must also adapt itself to the requirements of the former.” Second (p. 256), Lévi-Strauss writes, “Decoration is actually *created* for the face; but in another sense the face is predestined to be decorated, since it is only by means of decoration that the face receives its social dignity and mystical significance. Decoration is conceived for the face, but the face itself exists only through decoration.” Although Lévi-Strauss’s focus here is on the face, he also makes it clear that the same argument applies to the rest of the body because, with the face, tattooing on other parts of the body completes the whole persona. Wallace gets to the heart of this at the outset of her chapter (p. 10):

The decision of the individual to augment the natural body through temporary or permanent decoration reveals precise information regarding the person’s social role, whether

actual or conceptual. Body decoration also reflects information on the society the individual inhabits...Specific colors, patterns, ornamental items...are all part of a culturally defined communication code...In this regard, body decoration reveals overall social, religious, and political systems, as well as the individual's place within these systems.

Wallace uses a variety of ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources and illustrations to discuss the specifics of the decorated body among the Indians of the Southeast from the 15th through the 20th centuries, including the various techniques of tattooing. She notes that "tattooing was practiced by almost every tribe in the lower Mississippi valley for which we have reports" (p. 31). Men, for example, were tattooed as part of initiation rights (p. 29) and later to indicate their status as warriors (p. 32), and woe be to the man who had himself tattooed when he had not earned the right to such markings: "he would be disgraced and considered a coward" (p. 30). Among one group, a man who had falsified his status through tattoos "would have the design torn off him, skin and all" (p. 30).

Wallace echoes Lévi-Strauss's point about tattooing conferring social identity when she writes (p. 40): "The earliest data show that Native American tattooing served a variety of functions including communicating affiliation and membership, and identifying an individual's place in the social order. The extent of tattooing on any individual was indicative of that person's ascribed status and/or achieved martial endeavors."

The decline of tattooing and other body decoration in the Southeast coincides with the Historic Removal of the Five Civilized Tribes and others west to the newly formed Indian Territory in Arkansas and Oklahoma (p. 38). The possible revival of tattooing in the late 20th century reflects the desire by native peoples to regain their identity through "this important form of Native American body decoration and communication" (pp. 40–41).

**Aaron Deter-Wolf** examines the archaeological evidence for prehistoric tattooing but also includes a table (2.1): "Indigenous tattoo technology identified in ethnohistorical and ethnographic accounts, alphabetically by source." This valuable summary organizes much of the technology discussed in Wallace's preceding chapter and serves as a basis for possible ethnographic analogies to more ancient (archaeological) practices. Deter-Wolf also directs readers to other chapters in this volume that take up and add to the materials he discusses, or from which he derives information, which makes his chapter even more useful.

Deter-Wolf states (p. 44) "There is no direct evidence in the form of ancient tattooed human remains to conclusively establish the antiquity of tattooing in sub-Arctic North America." This is not precisely correct. Seemingly patterned marks on a few long bones of pre-contact Jornada Mogollon skeletons suggest the possibility the individuals were tattooed and that the process went so deeply into the flesh as to mark the bones themselves. Deter-Wolf argues (p. 47) that widespread tattooing throughout the Western hemisphere in the 16th century suggests the practice extends back to the Late Archaic. Yet he admits (p. 47) that only a "handful" of ancient artifacts have been identified as tattooing tools or related paraphernalia (As a side note, he makes clear [pp. 50–51] the importance of unpublished records and collections for discovering such materials).

Deter-Wolf (p. 55) cites evidence that European contact made available metal needles, which made tattooing "more effective and less painful," gunpowder, which

became used as a pigment, and (p. 58) cinnabar, which is highly toxic when incorporated into tattooing ink. Figure 2.10, “Reproduction of possible tattoo implements based on ethnohistorical and ethnographic sources” highlights 10 implements used in tattooing experiments (presumably on animal skins and not humans). However, his discussion of lithic tools (p. 65) does not specifically include Hopewellian lamellar blades which some archaeologists believe were used, along with bone-tool kits, as tattooing or scarification instruments in association with mortuary rituals (Ken Farnsworth, personal communication 2013). Steere also mentions this possible function for Hopewellian bladelets in his *Great Needles* chapter (pp. 87–90).

Deter-Wolf (p. 68) further argues that “Native American tattooing was performed exclusively by ritual specialists who enjoyed elevated social status and were responsible for curation and deployment of the tattoo bundle,” and that tattooing took place within consecrated spaces. In support he cites (p. 69) a burial at the base of Adena Mound as “the best example to date of tattoo implements recovered from a restricted ritual space.” He also cites Mound Q at Moundville as “indicative of a fully fledged tattoo workshop” (p. 71). If these are not wholly new observations and inferences, they are certainly important ones that require comparable research at other sites.

**Benjamin Steere** begins his chapter by looking for ethnographic and archaeological evidence to support the hypothesis that Swift Creek paddle designs on pottery were also tattooed onto bodies. He provides a useful review of cross-cultural data from people in Africa, Brazil, Borneo, and Polynesia among peoples who have either elaborate body tattooing and similar ceramic motifs, or tattooing and similar wood carving motifs. This lays a good foundation for his argument, but Steere does not consider the Maori, among whom facial tattooing is strongly reminiscent of some of the Swift Creek designs in Figure 3.2 (no historical connection is inferred or implied by this reviewer). The fact that Mafa and Bulahay potters in southern Cameroon explicitly compare their pottery vessels to the human body and its constituent parts (p. 76) also reinforces Steere’s argument.

Steere writes (p. 85), “It is a short logical leap to interpret these [e.g., concentric circle, eye, spiral, four-part designs] to basic themes in Southeastern Indian cosmology” which leads one to wonder whether these designs on the human body mean that the body, itself, incorporates and represents the same cosmology (a point Reilly, Duncan, and Dye explicitly make in their chapters). Steere admits (p. 93), “Finding direct archaeological evidence for Middle Woodland tattooing will be extremely difficult, and the indirect evidence—bone needles, stone bladelets, and human effigies—can be interpreted in different ways.” But he also asserts, “The comparative ethnographic evidence examined here offers compelling models for how and why the people who made Swift Creek pots...might have decorated their bodies.” Whether or not one agrees with Steere, he has presented a tantalizing argument and a reason to look more closely at complex pottery motifs among peoples who practice(d) body decoration.

**Lars Krutak**, in the first of two consecutive chapters, examines tattooing among Northern Woodland groups. He begins (p. 95) with three points: 1) Tattooing as a graphic art speaks to the abilities and achievements of Woodlands tattoo artists; 2)

among the Iroquois and others, tattooing was “employed as a form of medicine and worked to assert and inscribe tribal affiliation and social status” which harkens back to Lévi-Strauss’s remarks at the beginning of this review. Furthermore, tattoos as a form of medicine applies more to women than men among Northern Woodlands groups (p. 129); and 3) “tattoos signified military achievement by warriors who engaged their enemies in hand-to-hand combat.” Krutak focuses on this last—tattoos as a means to project individuals’ power through military accomplishments. His further intent “is to identify and analyze these highly symbolic and magical expressions by outlining indigenous patterns of thought that were inextricably bound to the personal imagery of the warrior body” (p. 95), so throughout the chapter he interprets symbols that appear on objects as tattoos. He also argues (p. 112) that while “most writers suggest that the fullest expression of this art was probably extinct before the start of the Revolutionary War...I believe that the most symbolic and complex forms of tattooing probably died out even earlier...only as late as the seventeenth century.” He bases this on ethnographic accounts, notably among the Creeks. This intriguing argument may be correct, but requires further support.

Krutak then follows with an extensive review of ethnographic and ethnohistoric literature to examine “The Warrior’s Path,” “Manitous and Manitos,” “War Birds,” “War Clubs and Ornamented Trees,” “Totems, Marked Graves, and Warrior Tattoos (a warrior’s manitou was often tattooed upon his body to make it more lasting and sacred [p. 129],” and “Tattooed ‘Bodies’ of Evidence.” Krutak has an excellent description of the Ojibway tattooing process (pp. 110–111), and again makes the point that “false marks”—tattoos not earned—were removed in a public ceremony (p. 112). Finally, one of the more interesting aspects of this chapter is the comparison of tattoos with etched or engraved marks on war clubs, especially “gunstock” and ball head clubs.

From the title of **Krutak’s second chapter**, “The Art of Enchantment,” the reader might assume the tattooing would involve symbols that protect one from danger or give one power over others. There is a bit of this, if largely implicit, but like the preceding chapter, Krutak’s focus is on tattooing as indicative of achievements in warfare, especially one-on-one combat. Furthermore, a significant addition to such achievements was that those being tattooed also had to pay lavishly for the honors. This practice also extended to women who could be tattooed as the daughters of high-ranking fathers, the fathers providing lavish gifts on their daughters’ behalf (pp. 133–134). Thus, among the Hidatsa, Osage, Otoe, Ponca, Omaha, and Iowa, tattooing was a personal signifier of high socioeconomic status. Finally, although the chapter title includes “Great Plains,” the geographical focus is only the eastern Great Plains, but even the Eastern Great Plains is clearly peripheral to Wallace’s definition of the Southeast which opens the volume. The same is true for Krutak’s chapter on the Northern Woodlands, that includes materials on groups from the Southeast.

**F. Kent Reilly III** begins his chapter by noting there are three types of body modification—painting, tattooing, and piercing—the last two of which “serve as scripts and mnemonic devices recorded on the manuscript of the human body” (p. 176). This echoes Lévi-Strauss’s comments, cited earlier, about the body (specifically the face)

existing to be decorated, by which it receives its cultural significance. Reilly employs William Fenton's methodology of "upstreaming"—"using the functioning present society as a model for critically examining the past" (p. 177). Riley examines painted imagery from Picture Cave in Missouri and Gottschall Rockshelter in southwestern Wisconsin to link the pictographs with engraved depictions on shell artifacts from the Great Mortuary of Craig Mound at the Spiro site (p. 178). Riley explores a number of decorative themes and objects, arguing (p. 181) that "tattooing recorded esoteric knowledge...that became critical to the performance of the sacred." Furthermore, the Braden-style body decoration, "as specific tattooed symbols, serves as a heraldic badge" (p. 183). Reilly's argument is interesting and persuasive, up to a point: he "confirms that motif sets were shared between human body decoration or tattooing and valued ritual objects" (p. 193). In the end, however, that the decorations depicted on images from Picture Cave and Gottschall Rockshelter and from Spiro Mound *are* tattooing, and *not* painting, remain problematical rather than certainties.

The seventh chapter, **James Duncan's** analysis of Dhegihan tattoos, refers back to materials presented by Wallace in Chapter 1 for the historical context and also references earlier work by Krutak and others. Duncan's focus here "is the interpretation of the iconography of the tattoos and a possible explanation of the ideology expressed by as portion of that iconography" (p. 195). There is considerable overlap between the materials presented and those from preceding chapters and with the final chapter in the volume, so readers may find themselves flipping back and forth to follow Duncan's references.

Duncan states that "tattooing among these Dhegiha Sioux...was not described as an artistic endeavor...but an important ritual...to insure a long life and many descendants" (p. 197). As with so many of the other examples in this volume, the right to be tattooed had to be earned—most commonly through achievements in warfare—and one who had himself tattooed without earning that right suffered the consequences: among the Osage, the offender's skin with the tattoo was flayed to remove the tattoo (p. 198). Some Osage men had their faces tattooed, others did not (p. 208). Duncan argues that tattooing survived in the southeastern-most part of Missouri and northeastern Arkansas, as evidenced in effigy pottery (p. 198). The pottery may indicate tattooing, but it may also indicate facial painting.

Duncan concludes that tattooing "is an ancient tradition among North American Indians...and "The use of complex designs as indicators of a person's lineage and military prowess is an essential and fundamental principle within the iconography of the Western Mississippians. Among the Dhegihan people and their Siouan relatives, tattoos charter and sanction specific ritual behavior" (p. 211). Few would argue with his point. Duncan also reiterates the economic significance and impact of tattooing mentioned earlier by Krutak.

**David Dye** has the final chapter in this book, and like Duncan, focuses on Mississippian tattooing, although he extends it beyond to the Osage, Omaha, and other prairie-plains groups. He begins by stating that "body art analysis must shift from a perspective where painting and tattooing is envisioned as one component of decorative design or temporal and spatial markers to an approach that investigates fundamental

religious concepts” (pp. 215–216). In this Dye echoes arguments of some other authors in this volume but argues that “Body painting and tattooing has received little attention, however, especially as a guide to understanding indigenous religious beliefs” (p. 216). He also states that tattooing facial designs on men is at least as old as the early Hopewell period, this based on raptor symbolism (p. 246). Or is it facial painting?

Dye then provides a long, useful synthesis of ethnohistoric and ethnographic data (pp. 216–238) before turning his attention to Western Mississippian life, death, rebirth, and men and women. That much of Dye’s synthesis recounts materials discussed earlier in the volume indicates there is only a limited amount of data available, so while researchers may bring different theoretical and methodological approaches to their studies, there is a fixed, limited amount of basic information available to work with.

Dye notes two important aspects of the groups’ cosmology: “The belief that souls, or spirits, could be manipulated was a fundamental concept throughout eastern North America where spirit trail servants were ritually assigned to the dead as recently as the early post-World War II period.” Consequently, “the Dhegiha constructed their conceptions of gender on complementary relationships, rather than inequality” (p. 220); and “Two fundamental aspects of the universe’s life-giving forces ensured tribal perpetuity: warriors, who took life, and women, who gave life” (p. 221). Tattooing and the specific designs placed on men and women reflected this cosmology. Later, when discussing Western Mississippian life forces, Dye argues engraved female effigy bottles of the early 17th century combined with early 18th century ethnohistorical accounts of Dhegiha people, “narrow the gap between archaeological and ethnographic evidence for ritual supplicatory tattooing” (p. 244). He concludes (p. 250) by stating that “Tattooing and body painting reflect deeply embedded religious beliefs associated with recycling life throughout eastern North America.” Well, yes, but it’s not clear that one can argue for the primacy of one decorative technique over the other, at least, not quite yet.

This is a fascinating volume on a subject for which detailed investigation is long overdue. These reports also make clear that finding new primary data would help resolve some of the questions discussed herein, especially distinguishing permanent tattooing from temporary painting on objects and people. One wonders, for example, whether a rigorous study of source materials such as the *Jesuit Relations* might turn up new information. Or has this been done? Regardless, there is a wealth of information here to interest a wide range of scholars of the Eastern Woodlands and Eastern Plains.