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TATTOOING AMONG THE ARABS OF IRAQ

By WINIFRED SMEATON

DURING the period 1933–35 residence in Iraq gave me the opportunity of making certain observations on tattooing among Arabs and other peoples living in the country. Comparable material is to be found not only in Egypt and North Africa, but also on the other side of the Arabian Peninsula, in Iran and India. Although evidence for the long history of the practice is to be found in certain places, notably Egypt, no attempt is here made to go into the history or origins of tattooing, but discussion is confined to the custom as it exists at present among the Arabs of Iraq.

The information was obtained in two ways. During 1934 as a member of the Field Museum Anthropological Expedition to the Near East (Henry Field, leader), I secured part of the data on tattooing and branding. This information was obtained from observations on all the individuals of the various groups measured, with questions as to the purpose of the tattooing and the names given to the various designs. Another source of information was from conversations with and demonstrations by professional tattooers in several places, as well as a number of women, mostly patients in the Baghdad hospital, who were elaborately tattooed. The two most important Arab groups observed during the anthropometric survey, including both male and female series, were the Shammar Beduins and the Albu Muhammad, a Marsh Arab tribe. Men from another marsh tribe, the Suwa'īd, were also included, as well as from the Dulaim and Anaiza Beduins. The rest of the information on the Arabs was obtained in towns: Baghdad, Al-Kadhimain, 'Amara, An-Nasiriya, and Mosul.

Tattooing, which is a wide-spread practice in Iraq, is known colloquially as daqq or dagg, from a root meaning to strike or knock, and as the name implies, it is tattooing by puncture. Occasionally a man with a literary background will employ the classical work washm, but daqq is the generally accepted Arabic word. Tattooing is a custom which already shows signs of disappearing, especially in the cities. It is rarely observed among the upper classes, and is despised by city-dwellers of the lower classes as well. On the other hand, the tribespeople and fellāḥīn still esteem it, particularly if the operation is performed in the town, and above all in Baghdad. Very often

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1 Read before the American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Chicago, March, 1936.

the tattooing is done by a townsoldm, but in the towns themselves, according to an informant in An-Nasiriya, it is considered shameful to tattoo.

In Iraq it is found that tattooing is divided into two kinds, broadly speaking: ornamental or decorative tattooing, and tattooing applied for magic or therapeutic reasons. This statement is based simply on observation, and does not take into account the ultimate origins of the practice. Probably most tattooing has an ultimate magico-religious purpose, whatever may be its course of evolution. Magic and healing must of necessity be considered together, for the dividing line is arbitrary, especially among an unsophisticated people.

Generally the therapeutic and magic designs are simple and crude in form, with curative tattooing applied to the seat of pain or injury, whereas the tattooing done for the sake of beauty (lil-ḥilā) is more extensive and elaborate. But sometimes the divisions overlap, and a simple design will have no other reason than to be decorative, or an ornamental design will be employed for a therapeutic reason. Cauterization as well as tattooing is widespread among the people of Iraq as a cure for many ills, but this is a separate subject.

The most common kind of curative tattooing is for sprains. Another is tattooing against headache and eye disease. The tattooing is applied on the temple or forehead or near the eye. Tattooing is also used as a cure for local skin infection, and localized pain generally, and very often against rheumatism and cold.

All these, to our way of thinking, tend to be magical, but there is another type of tattooing which is avowedly magical, in which the tattooing is applied with the intention of helping to bring about some desired contingency. Magical tattooing is chiefly the concern of women, for here we enter the world of old wives' lore. Three recognizable varieties are found among the instances which came under my observation. The first is designed to induce pregnancy, a matter of great concern to Arab women; the second has the purpose of guarding children, especially boys, against death; and the third consists of charms for love or against other magic.

Tattooing to induce pregnancy was observed in only one case, but the practice was confirmed by statements from two other informants. One woman in the Baghdad hospital had three large dots irregularly placed on the lower abdomen, as well as a design around the navel. The dots in particular were to insure her having children, but she said she had already borne one child when the tattooing was applied. This was done on the third day of menstruation. A midwife from Al-Kadhimain, one of the best infor-
mants on the magic aspects of tattooing, also mentioned the practice of tattooing to insure child-bearing. According to her, the tattooing may be a single dot or a small design consisting of three or five dots, applied below the navel, or on the back just above the buttocks. It must be done on the second or third day of menstruation. A single dot in the center of the navel was specified by Kulthumah, the tattooer in An-Nasiriya.

A dot on the end of a child’s nose is the most general form of magic tattooing encountered. In a country where the infant mortality is high, magic practices to preserve a child’s life will be highly in favor. If a woman has lost several children, she will have the successive ones tattooed with a single dot, either on the end of the nose or on the lower abdomen. Some informants said that the magic effect was extended to later-born children, but others said that it was not effective for more than one child, and later-born children would have to be tattooed likewise. The tattooer in An-Nasiriya said that all the men in the village of Samawa are tattooed with a dot on the end of the nose, and one above the mouth on either side. This is done when they are children to make them look like girls so they will not die. A variation was observed in the case of a policeman in Baghdad who came of the Uzairij tribe. Instead of a dot on the nose he had on each temple a cross with a dot on each angle. His mother’s previous children had all died, he said, so she had had him tattooed in this way to preserve him. He added that the design was also good for the head.

The efficacy of the third type of magical tattooing, which is a form of sympathetic magic, is aided by having someone read the Qur’an while the tattooing is being applied. This is practiced secretly by women, and I came across only one or two instances. In Baghdad I saw a woman with three dots tattooed in a triangle on the palm of her right hand to insure her keeping her husband’s love. A similar design on the left hand would mean that the woman no longer wanted her husband’s devotion. The midwife in Al-Kadhimain had a circle of five dots on the palm of her right hand. She said that she was her husband’s second wife, and when he took a third, she decided that something must be done to ward off any possible conjuring on the part of the new wife. So one Friday noon, the most effective time, she had her right palm tattooed while a woman mullah read Qur’an. The potency of the tattooing could not be doubted, for the result was that her husband divorced both his other wives and kept her!

Besides the magic and therapeutic varieties, there is a vast amount of tattooing whose ostensible purpose is to beautify the wearer. Most Arab women, at least outside the cities, are so tattooed. Not only the face and hands are decorated, but arms and feet, back, thighs, chest, and abdomen.
Among the Albu Muhammad definite observations were made on only a few women, but from superficial observation it seemed that nearly all of them were tattooed. The husband of one Albu Muhammad woman stated that his tribeswomen tattoo extensively because the men like it, and refuse to marry a girl who is not tattooed. Among the total of one hundred and twenty-nine Shammar women observed, only three were not tattooed, and they were young girls.

A very pretty and elaborately tattooed girl from the neighborhood of Hilla, who was twenty years old and had been married seven years, was one of my richest finds, especially for the actual designs. Her tattooing had been applied not all at one time, but during the course of three years. During her tenth year, her face, forearms, hands, and chest were tattooed; during the following year, her thighs and back; and in her twelfth year, her feet and upper arms were tattooed. All this was simply ornamental, but she had also a little curative tattooing, namely, a single dot in the inner corner of the right eye because of pain in the eye, and three marks on the right thigh, done by herself, and a linear mark on the right foot, tattooed to cure pain in the leg, which occurred after childbirth.

Another informant at An-Nasiriya said that her face, hands, arms, and feet had been tattooed some time before marriage, and her thighs, back, and abdomen had been done at the time of her marriage—all in one operation, which took seven hours, and must have been exceedingly painful.

Although the idea was never suggested by any of my informants that tattooing is a puberty rite for girls, the fact is that for the most part, girls are tattooed about the time of reaching puberty, or at least before marriage, which is apt to occur not long after puberty. There seems, however, to be no sort of tabu attached to the operation, either for the person tattooed or for the operator.

Tattooing among the Arabs is not confined to the women, as one is sometimes led to believe, but is practiced to a wide extent by the men as well, although the latter for the most part confine theirs to the hand and forearm and the face. But tattooing of the face is not as common among men as among women, and where it is found among men, it generally has a definite purpose, magic or curative, while designs on the hands and arms may have such a purpose, or may be simply decorative. Sometimes it is admitted that such tattooing is for beauty, and sometimes, if the man is rather ashamed of what he considers a feminine method of adornment, he says it is high, nothing. It may be suspected that the typical wrist design displayed by men, which outlines the wrist and back of the hand, may have the fundamental purpose of strengthening the wrist, and in fact, this reason
Fig. 1. Facial, body, and arm tattooing of Arab women. a–d, Women of Shammar; e, Non-tribal woman of Baghdad; f, Gypsy woman (Kaulia).
Fig. 2. Body and hand tattooing of Arab men and women. a, b, Woman of Albu Muhammad; c, d, Men of Albu Muhammad; e, Shammar woman; f, Dulaim man. Curative tattooing is illustrated in d.
was given by a professional tattooer in 'Amara. Many men were observed with lines tattooed across their wrists as a cure for sprains. Sprained wrists and thumbs seemed to be quite common, according to the number of cases in which tattooing had been resorted to as a cure.

Tattooing seems to be more common among men in the south of Iraq, that is, the Marsh Arabs near 'Amara, and the settled tribes of the district around An-Nasiriya, than among the Beduins. Among the latter, not more than one-third were tattooed, while among the settled tribes, at least three-quarters of the men were tattooed.

Nearly all tattooing among the Arabs of Iraq is done by women, mostly professionals. It is not a hereditary profession, but any woman who has the skill and inclination can become a daggāgah or tattooer. No evidence was produced to show that the tattooer must come from any specific group, except that in a few instances the tattooing was said to have been done by gypsies, or that she must undergo any preliminary ceremonies or observe certain tabus at any time. Much of the simpler sort of tattooing is done by mothers upon their children, sometimes when only three days old.

Arab tattooing is always blue in color, and the designs are geometrical, or sometimes extremely stylized representations of natural objects. There are various methods of making the pigment for tattooing, which is known as kohl or baṣmah, but the principle is the same, for the chief ingredient is always carbon in the form of lamp-black. The word kohl usually refers to the powdered antimony which is put around the eyes, but it is also used to mean lamp-black, which is used by the poor in the same way as the antimony. The carbon is precipitated by burning either the ordinary kerosene of lamps, or tallow, or a piece of cloth dipped in dihn, the mutton fat used for cooking. Sometimes indigo is added, or bile from the gall-bladder of an ox, which sets the dye, but the commonest method is to gather the soot precipitated on the bottom of a dish held over the lamp, and make a paste. Many people hold that the soot must be moistened with ḥalīb ʿumm al-bint, the milk of a woman nursing a daughter, which has magic properties, but others say that it is not good, and use water or kerosene. The use of human milk was noted in several places, always the milk of a woman nursing a girl, as the milk for a girl is supposed to be specially soothing and cooling. On the other hand, the chief tattooer in An-Nasiriya said that it was not good to use milk because it attracted flies, and then the tattooing spoiled. She herself used the simplest of ingredients, the soot of kerosene moistened with water; and samples of her work were both clean-cut and of good color.

In all cases the instruments used are ordinary sewing needles of a varying number according to their size and the technique of the operator. Usu-
ally they are of a good size, but smaller than a darning needle, from two to four bound together for at least half their length. First the design, which in most cases depends on the taste and skill of the operator, is drawn on the skin with the needles dipped in the dye, and then pricked through. The tattooed surface may or may not bleed; whether it does or not is not important, except that some women in An-Nasiriya said that it is better to perform the operation in the morning because it bleeds a lot if it is done at noon. The tattooed area may be swollen and matter for three days. A scab forms, which comes off after three to seven days, leaving the design well fixed under the skin.

As for the designs employed, a great deal could be written on the subject, especially on the history of the names, and the comparison of the designs themselves with those found in ancient and modern times on pottery and textiles. The designs are geometrical or stylized. Generally they consist of combinations of dots and lines, especially zigzag and cross-hatched lines, circles, crescents, chevrons, triangles, stars, and crosses, and elaborations of these. The elements everywhere are the same, but of course in some districts certain patterns are used, which in other places are not known, or at least not held in favor.

The patterns also depend on the part of the body tattooed, especially in the case of ornamental tattooing among women, for curative tattooing is usually simple in form. Both men and women have the back of the hand and wrist tattooed, the whole design often being known as the "glove." Lines with some sort of cross-hatching or other decorations form the most important parts of patterns on the legs and arms, and down the chest. The latter type of design is found everywhere among the women, and consists essentially of a line which begins at the lower lip and runs down the chin, neck, and chest nearly to the waistline, and sometimes extends to the navel. Other designs on both forearm and upper arm circle the arm like bracelets, and similar designs are found on the ankles, although foot and ankle patterns do not necessarily go all the way around.

Women's eyebrows are frequently tattooed, and most women have some tattooing on the face, especially on the chin, and dots between the eyes and above the upper lip. Sometimes vertical lines on the chin are extended through the lower lip, and I have seen a few women with all of the lower lip tattooed.

The elements of the patterns are given their proper titles: star, crescent, zigzag, double zigzag, and so on, while the whole designs are generally named for the part of the body adorned: chin, chest, back, side, foot, or wrist. A design on the side of the cheek is known as "the shadow of the side-lock," and dots on the upper lip may be called "mustache" or "shadow of the nose-ring." A single dot on the face, and especially between the eyes, is
called "dimple." Rayed figures are known as "sun," "star," or "flower," while circles may be called "disc," "ring," or "moon." It is interesting to note that one or two of the terms used to denote small designs on the face refer originally to marks or blazes on horses. A design consisting of a line with single cross-hatching, particularly on the wrist, is often called "comb," but I am inclined to think that the design is derived from the figure of an animal, presumably a gazelle.

Conventionalized gazelles are perhaps the most interesting of the designs noted. Men particularly are fond of having a gazelle tattooed on the inner forearm. Women also have gazelles, on the forearm or hand, and sometimes in pairs on the breast, on each side of the line running down the chest from the face. Since representations of living beings are forbidden to Moslems, one is tempted to think that the tattooed gazelles may be survivals of an ancient totemism. Some of the so-called "combs" look very much like elaborated gazelles, while on the other hand, a simplified form something like a broad letter H is also called gazelle.

Another interesting and primitive design, which was found in all groups, is the cross. It is always found with arms of equal length, and frequently there is a dot in each angle. From ancient times, and in many places, the cross has had a certain magic function attached to it, and the idea is borne out by one of my informants, the midwife from Al-Kadhimain, who said that the cross, or as she called it, the four-sided, is the best, that is, the strongest design. The design of the dotted cross is by no means modern, for it is noted among those of tiles from Samarra,\(^3\) dating from the middle of the ninth century, and on fourteenth century potsherds found by Dr N. Debevoise\(^4\) in the neighborhood of Tell Dahab, near Tell Asmar. Another sherd bearing the same design was found at Tābūs on the Euphrates.\(^5\) Debevoise suggests that these stamped designs may be potters' marks.

This is but a brief summary of such notes and observations as I was able to make on tattooing among the Arabs of Iraq. It is hoped to publish a fuller account later, with special attention to the designs and names thereof. The present discussion, while by no means exhaustive or conclusive, will, it is hoped, contribute something to our knowledge of tattooing in southwestern Asia.

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\(^4\) Staff member of the Oriental Institute Expedition of the University of Chicago, excavating at Tell Asmar during the season 1931–32.
\(^5\) Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld, *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet*