

Maya Dental Mutilation--Ouch...!

By Dr. Herman Smith (<http://ambergriscaye.com/museum/digit3.html>)



The archeological and historic records are full of examples of the lengths people will go to make themselves more attractive to their contemporaries. Tattooing, scarification and the piercing of various parts of one's body for the insertion of trinkets are typical of the many ways humans try to enhance their personal appearance. Another method of self adornment that has almost, but not quite, disappeared is dental mutilation; the filing or grinding of one's teeth to shape them into what is seen as an improvement over Mother Nature.

The ancient Maya practiced dental mutilation over a very long span of time, beginning centuries ago and carried out right up until the European intrusions of the sixteenth century. Teeth were filed into points, ground into rectangles and drilled with small holes to permit the insertion of small round pieces of jade or polished iron pyrite (fool's gold). In all, over a hundred different patterns of cross-hatching, circular holes and shape alteration are found among the ancient Maya. Three such examples are on exhibit at the Ambergris Museum, recovered from burials on the island. One very rare case of filed teeth is the jaw of a woman in her late 20's. The teeth have been filed such that they interlock between the upper and lower jaw. Another upper jaw shows how the front incisors were ground to a point, perhaps to emulate the fangs of the jaguar, an animal held in high esteem by the Maya. Several teeth that were drilled for the purpose of fitting small circular pieces of jade are also on display.

The earliest examples of dental mutilation are found in the archeological record in South America. It is likely that the Maya picked up the notion of tooth alteration from the early peoples in Peru or Ecuador. The practice was largely restricted to the elite ruling class among the Maya, which presents us with a bit of a problem concerning the young women whose body was found in a shallow grave at Tres Cocos unaccompanied by the sorts of grave goods normally associated with high-status burials.

Looking at the mutilated teeth one immediately asks how did the Maya achieve such precise detail without the benefit of steel instruments and, more importantly, didn't the process generate a lot of pain? Anyone who has spent more than five minutes in a dentist's chair knows what I'm talking about. In seeking the answers to these and other rather technical questions, I called upon my good friend Dr. Wil Lala at Caribbean Villas, whom I knew had practiced dentistry for many years in the United States before moving to San Pedro. According to Wil, the Maya most certainly had the use of some sort of drug to render the patient insensitive to the mutilation process. There are in fact several plants in Belizean forests that can produce the numbing effect of novacaine or other modern drugs used in dentistry and other medical applications. As far as the carving of the teeth is concerned, Wil actually did some experimentation with a fresh human tooth that had just been extracted. This tooth represented the texture and hardness one expects in a "living tooth." Wil found that by using an obsidian blade he could achieve a small notch in the tooth, suggesting that extensive dental mutilation would take a long time and consume a lot of obsidian blades, (and in my case a lot of drugs !!!) The resultant disfigurement of the incisors would make the tooth thereafter sensitive to hot and cold and any sort of sweets. Ah, the price we pay to be beautiful.

Wil assured me that the level of technical expertise demonstrated by the person responsible for the dental work done on the young woman from Tres Cocos is truly an incredible achievement considering the tools available at the time. . . . He also believes, and I am inclined to agree, that this woman was most likely part of a ruling family that could have been caught up in the chaos of the Maya collapse and had the misfortune to be killed and hastily buried in a pauper's grave. The potshards found in the grave fill are from the Terminal Classic period; the time of the collapse and the confusion that accompanied the restructuring of Maya society.

Dr. Herman Smith received a PhD in Anthropology from Southern Methodist University. He was the Museum Archeologist for the Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History in Corpus Christi, Texas. He lived and researched the Maya in Belize for 12 years. The article was written in the 1990s.