



Jurisprudence Section - 2013

F10 The History of Tattoos and Their Use as a Means of Identification

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better knowledge of the development of tattoos and how they can be used as a means of identification.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how tattoos can be used as an identifier.

As one can imagine, the art of tattooing was been around for quite some time. In fact, there is evidence to demonstrate that tattooing was done thousands of years ago.

One of the oldest known specimens is that of Otzi the Iceman, dated around 3300 B.C. He had 57 separate tattoos. Among these were a cross on the inside of the left knee, six straight lines, fifteen centimeters long above the kidneys, and numerous small parallel lines thought to be possible therapeutic tattoos for the treatment of arthritis. There have also been several mummies from West China as well as mummies from permafrost dated around 300 B.C. It is obvious, therefore, that tattooing has been around for quite some time. In fact, evidence shows that tattooing was quite prevalent in China as well as Egypt, India, and the Philippines, just to name a few. Further, in the Philippines, tattooing to some was a form of rank and accomplishment. Some believed that tattoos had magical qualities. Many tribes have a tattoo culture, such as those found in Indonesia.

In Europe, pre-Christian Germanic, Celtic, and other central and northern European tribes were often heavily tattooed. During the gradual process of Christianization in Europe, tattoos were often considered remaining elements of paganism and were, for the most part, legally prohibited.

As previously mentioned, tattooing was exhibited in China as early as 3300 B.C.; however, recently, tattooing for spiritual and decorative purposes in Japan is thought to extend back to at least the Paleolithic period. This would be about 10,000 B.C.

In Samoa, the traditional male tattoo is called the pe'a and the traditional female tattoo is called the malu. The word tattoo is believed to have originated from the Samoan word "tattoo."

Tattooing has obviously been a practice for thousands of years as evidenced in many cultures although the reasons vary greatly because of culture, religious beliefs, and society. Some consider tattooing an art form, while others consider it a ritual or requirement to have performed.

During the latter decades of the 20th-century, tattooing became a popular social practice worldwide. Many younger (and some older) people today either have aspirations to have a tattoo somewhere on their body, or already have one or more. As we all know, the reasons vary as well as the shape and size of the tattoos.

Some cultures and religions ban tattoos. The orthodox Jews, for example, abide strictly to the third chapter of Leviticus, which states that one should not make gashes in one's skin for the dead: "Do not make marks on one's skin." Modern tattooing is included in this belief and is, therefore, not permitted. The Christian churches do not prohibit tattooing so long as the tattoo is not an image directly opposed to Christian teaching or religious sentiment. As with the Jews, the Muslims also forbid tattooing.

It is therefore observed that tattoos are obtained for a variety of reasons. Further, tattoos can obviously be used as an identifier of an individual. Actually, tattoos can identify an individual in one of two ways. First, at times, an individual may have a tattoo as a requirement or a symbol of a group he or she belongs to, such as a gang. Perhaps someone is tattooed against one's will, as in the case of a prison camp. Secondly, a tattoo can simply be used to identify a person because of the fact that someone else is aware of the tattoo and the location on the body of the tattoo.

In conclusion, whatever the reason, tattoos have been around for thousands of years. And, tattoos most likely will be around for many thousands of years in the future. Of the many ways to identify an individual, tattoos are simply another way to acquire a positive identification.

Tattoos, Skin Markings, Identifying Tattoos