

Murderers' skulls. A diagnosis of criminal anthropology on degenerative atavistic traits

Crani di omicidi. Una diagnosi di antropologia criminale basata sui tratti atavici degenerativi

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Does the shape of the face reveal consciousness? Can abnormal anatomical features reveal a deviant character?

From the second half of the 19th century, investigative sciences were beginning to ask these questions.-

Many articles published in journals of Forensic Medicine, Psychiatry and Phreniatry show us the interest in these new theories that Lombroso and also other clinicians began to draw up [1]

An interesting article published in the *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry, Criminal Anthropology and related sciences* in 1902, brought to light again the positivist thinking closely connected to the Lombrosian School which determined the deep link between the shape of the face and the behavior of the alienated and criminals.

The article, written by the doctors Giuseppe Antonini (follower of Lombroso and director of the psychiatric hospital of Milan in Italy from 1911 to 1931) and Mario Falcicola (medical assistant in Italian asylum of Como), reported the results of an anthropological examination conducted on four skulls belonged to "alienated criminals" and collected by the museum of Raggi, set up inside the mental hospital of Voghera (northern Italy) [2].

Through this analysis, the authors wanted to contribute to Criminal Anthropology and to sustain the Atavism theory by confirming the degenerative features of the skull recorded within a homogeneous crime group of murders. The authors also invite even the most skeptical clinicians to no longer doubt Lombroso's theories giving them their full support.

These skulls belonged to criminals affected by psychopathological conditions.

The first one belonged to a Giuseppe V, an inhabitant of Montù Beccaria (Pavia province, Lombardy) who died from articular rheumatism at the age of 60. "Born criminal", as identified by the two doctors, Giuseppe was a murderer who served 25 years in prison and who was later charged with surveillance contravention. He was interned in the asylum of Voghera. The doctors recorded that at the time he was admitted, Giuseppe was in a state of serious agitation, manic states with chaotic delusions. The second is of Giovanni P, who died at the age of 60 of bronchial pneumonia. Giovanni suffered from consecutive dementia. In his life, he spent time in the military and was accused of having fired a shotgun against a soldier. He was acquitted by the Assize Court of Palermo because they recognized that he was suffering from mental illness and he was consequently hospitalized in the asylum of Palermo. After that, Giovanni was transferred to the asylum in Voghera. He arrived there in a state of dementia.

Gaetano R. from Pavia is the third case studied. He tried to kill the owner of a shop and then fell into a depressive state with hallucinatory episodes. He was 42 years old when he died of a pulmonary edema.

The fourth skull belonged to Serafino T. The man that suffered from dementia, was convicted of inflicting a serious injury on his brother, for trivial reasons. He died of enteric-colitis.

All these skulls presented the degenerative feature drawn up by Lombroso in his research.

The doctors recorded that the following characteristics belonged to all four skulls: protruding eyebrows, asymmetry of the bones of the skull, the semicircular line of the temples, the lemurine appendix of the jaw, protruding cheekbones, protruding orbital and front angles.

Other degenerative traits were also found on three out of the four skulls: the thickening of the bones of the skull, the protruding frontal crest and the canine fossa.

The median occipital dimple, a key feature of the atavism theory, was recorded in two skulls as well as the presence of traces of the metopic suture, facial asymmetry, occipital condyles with double articular facet, asymmetry of the bones of the nose, remarkable amplitude of the suborbital fissure and a marked pragmatism.

In addition, the doctors recorded further individual features that were always representative for the criminal anthropology of degenerative stigmata: protruding frontal sinuses, deviation of the septum, elusive forehead, double suborbital hole, flattened palate and accessory nasal bones.

This diagnostic relationship, like many others present in literature, confirms how many psychiatrists between the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century trusted Lombroso's atavism theory [3].

The degenerative characteristics, especially at the cranial level, found by Lombroso had to determine the aptitude for crime [4] and the propensity for mental illness [5].

Not only. Several psychiatric institutes of that time set

aside rooms to collect alienated skulls, also testifying to how anthropological anomalies were closely linked to deviated personalities.

Fortunately, this chapter in the history of forensic psychopathology, forensic medicine and forensic psychiatry did not last long, but it is interesting to bring to the attention of today's clinicians how the study of the criminal, albeit erroneously, or based on the analysis of physical characteristics, has however, brought attention to the criminal and no longer just the crime.

This sought to contribute to the development of forensic psychopathology.

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