

## Regarding the study of the anatomical collections of the criminal anthropology schools

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**Abstract.** It is necessary to take a cue from the investigative method conducted by the authors Verderame and Borrelli and presented in the article *Malformed skulls in criminal anthropology: a preliminary study on the Cranioteca of the Anthropology Museum of Naples* published in the *Journal of Medicina Historica*. As a scholar of the History of Medicine who has also dealt with the scientific aspects of criminal anthropology, I find the contribution of paleopathologists to be important in the study of the osteological collections of museums linked to the history of psychiatry in the 19th century. Mine also wants to be an invitation to increase the dialogue between the different skills also to enhance this type of anthropological heritage and awaken an interest in these issues also among the whole community.

**Key words:** De Blasio, Criminal Anthropology, Anthropological collections

I read with great interest the article *Malformed skulls in criminal anthropology: a preliminary study on the Cranioteca of the Anthropology Museum of Naples* (1) published in this journal by the authors Verderame and Borrelli and which concerns the anthropological study conducted in the past by the doctor and anthropologist Abele De Blasio (1858 -1945), a figure I dealt with some time ago (2).

I find that the article is truly exemplary in conducting historical medical investigations, especially referring to psychiatric diagnoses in the context of the Lombrosian school.

In fact, in the article we see how the authors proposed a precise comparison between the written sources, and therefore the clinical histories referring above all to the results of the autopsy exam on the cranial district, and the direct observation of the original osteological findings. There are several anatomical collections disseminated throughout our territory and which deserve greater attention, following the example of the study conducted by the aforementioned authors. However, we must consider that investments are still poor in terms of both research and enhancement of these

collections which could instead acquire a great importance within our museum heritage.

Of my particular interest in this article is the find called *pyramid skull of an epileptic* (3), a case already studied in the past but only from a historical point of view (4). We know that De Blasio, as an anthropology of Lombroso's school and supporter of Criminal Anthropology, correlated the condition of epilepsy, as other pathologies, to the abnormal development of the skull during the intrauterine life. Verderame and Borrelli, observing the skull preserved in the Cranioteca of the Anthropology Museum of Naples, recorded other anomalies, or lesions at the level of the sphenoid bone and the presence of *cribra orbitalia*, all alterations which allowed authors to hypothesize a diagnosis of congenital syphilis for the woman that the skull belonged to.

I found the close proximity to the positive school of criminal law of De Blasio especially when I analysed the study *Crime and geometric shape of the face among Neapolitan criminals* which obtained a place in the prestigious *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry, Anthropology Criminal and Related Sciences* (5). De Blasio de-

terminated from the morphology of the face the attitude for a specific category of crime (2).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the positivism created all the conditions for the birth of a psychiatric anthropology which gave observational tools aimed at identifying the “psychiatrically ill type” (6). Therefore, Criminal anthropology intended to answer a question that was anything but generic: “Can form explain substance?”

From De Blasio’s publications we see how the doctor is particularly attentive to this aspect, ie a close correlation between anatomy and deviant thought (7). Identifying, explaining, predicting psychiatric delusions meant making visible a pathological aspect that until then had remained hidden in the dark soul of humanity. This was possible with Criminal Anthropology, a merely positive diagnostic tool to give a scientific-biological sense to “diseases of the mind”.

I truly hope to read again the contributions of studies which, through comparative examinations of paleopathological analyzes on the findings and clinical histories elaborated by the doctors of the time, manage to really highlight the medical knowledge of the past. Moreover, I also think that this journal, dealing with both the history of medicine, paleopathology and bioethics can accommodate other studies on other anatomical collections to enhance the value of our anthropological heritage through the contribution of professionals capable of taking care of the study of anatomical collections considering the value of historical medical literature, exploiting paleopathological and anthropological skills and elaborating contents in

line with the ethical regulatory guidelines that have emerged in recent years.

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