Look Into the Eyes of a Neolithic Man in This Reconstruction

A new plaster model allows us to stare directly at the face of an elite man who lived 9,500 years ago in Jericho.

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The face of a man who lived 9,500 years ago in the Biblical city of Jericho has been reconstructed based on extensive new analysis of the "Jericho Skull," which is the oldest portrait in the British Museum.

The Jericho Skull is a face modeled in plaster over the man’s actual skull, which has now come to life in the vivid reconstruction described in the latest issue of British Archaeology.

The man’s identity remains unknown, but researchers think he could have held elite status, perhaps as a revered community elder. The Jericho Skull was one of seven discovered together by famed British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon (1906–1978) during excavations in 1953 at Jericho, a city now located in the Palestinian Territories near the Jordan River in the West Bank. The other skulls are distributed at museums across the globe.
“He was certainly a mature individual when he died, but we cannot say exactly why his skull, or for that matter the other skulls that were buried alongside him, were chosen to be plastered,” Alexandra Fletcher, the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Curator for the Ancient Near East at The British Museum, told Seeker. “It may have been something these individuals achieved in life that led to them being remembered after death.”

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Fletcher added that the individuals might have also been related, since each of the skulls in the same burial were missing their second and third molars, which she said could be an inherited trait.

The Imaging and Analysis Center at the Natural History Museum completed a micro-CT scan of the Jericho Skull, which led to the construction of a 3-D digital model of the object, complete with bones inside. For the first time, hidden areas were revealed, such as the shape of his palate, cheekbones, brow ridge and eye sockets.

The researchers determined that the skull lacked a jaw. They could also see that the man had broken and decayed teeth, and that he had broken his nose during his adult life, but that it had healed before he died.

Notably, there is evidence he had undergone tight head binding from early infancy that changed the shape of his skull.

“Head binding is something that many different peoples have undertaken in various forms around the world until very recently,” Fletcher explained. She said the practice of head binding in some modern cultures are intended to “make an individual appear more beautiful. In this case, the bindings have made the top and back of the head broader-different from other practices that aim for an elongated shape. I think this was regarded as a ‘good look’ in Jericho at this time.”

The head binding adds to evidence that the man and other individuals found with him were of an elite status.

Jericho is featured prominently in the Bible. Fletcher said that in the Book of Joshua, Jericho is the first city the Israelites came to after their return from Egypt. With Joshua as their leader, they marched around the city, shouting and blowing horns, causing Jericho’s walls to collapse.
“Most scholars agree that this is not an historically accurate account, but that it relates to the political situation in the Iron Age, when the territories around Jericho were vassal states of Assyria and Babylon,” Fletcher said. “During this period, huge numbers of people were forcibly moved from their homes to live in different areas.”

Since that Iron Age event happened around 900–500 B.C., Fletcher thinks it is unlikely that the Jericho Skull man could have been mentioned in the Bible.
When Biblical texts were written, however, remains a heated topic for debate. Hebrew writing dating to the 10th century B.C. has led some scholars to believe that portions of the Bible were crafted during what would have been the man’s lifetime.
What is clear is that when he died, his remains received special care. Someone cut a hole in his cranium. Soil was packed inside the space, to prevent the plaster applied outside of the skull from collapsing.

Human remains to this day are treated with special care, respect and dignity at The British Museum, which has a strict policy concerning how they must be handled. Because of the regulations, the researchers have not yet been able to determine the man’s eye and hair color.

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“If we were able to extract DNA from the human remains beneath the plaster, there is currently a very slight chance that we would be able to find out this individual’s hair and eye color,” Fletcher said. “I say a slight chance because the DNA preservation in such ancient human remains can be too poor to obtain any information.”

She added that a broken tooth remaining in his upper jaw might also contain DNA, but she and her colleagues are worried that if they worked with it, the rest of the plaster face could come apart. As technology and science continue to advance, she suspects that such work could be possible in the near future.

The reconstruction will be on view in the exhibit “Creating an ancestor: the Jericho Skull,” from December 15, 2016–February 19, 2017 at The British Museum. Fletcher and her team are hoping that the lifelike model can go on display in the museum’s permanent galleries afterward.

Top photo: Facial reconstruction of a man who lived 9,500 years ago in the Biblical city of Jericho. Credit: Copyright Trustees of the British Museum. Credit: RN-DS partnership **WATCH: What Did Prehistoric Humans Eat?**