Teeth Filing in Ancient Japan

Harunari Hideji

The custom of teeth filing consists in engraving two or three lines of grooves in human upper median incisors and one line of groove in the upper lateral incisor to work the teeth into forked form. This custom existed in Africa in 19th century, in the Central America from early Preclassic period (1400 B. C.) to Postclassic period (1500 A. D.) and in Japan in the latest Jomon period (1000–200 B. C.).

Specimens of teeth filing in Jomon period have been unearthed from 8 sites in Aichi Prefecture and Osaka Prefecture, both in Central Japan (28 samples in all). These 28 samples are divided into 13 males, 14 females and 1 unknown. The number of unearthed specimens is the highest in Ikawazu site (9 samples) and Yoshigo site (8 samples).

The teeth filing has been executed on about 20% of human adult bones unearthed at one site. Since the teeth filing is recognized also on the teeth of humans dead at their 15 to 16 and 19 to 20 years of age, it may assumed that almost all the filings were performed in their teens. Though some teeth filing remains inachieved on the teeth of humans at their 20s and 30s, we may presume that the filing was carried out in their teens too.

In this region, there unearthed two types of specimens of teeth extraction: type 4I where two upper canines and four lower incisors have been extracted and type 2C where two upper canines and two lower canine teeth have been extracted. It is assumed that any adult belonged to either of these two. Examples of teeth filing are found 25 cases in type 4I, 2 cases in type 2C and only 1 case where any lower tooth except two upper canines has not been extracted (type 0). The teeth filing is onesidedly numerous in the type 4I. Further let us note that the human bones with waist ornaments belong, for the most part, to the 4I type. The author assumes that the humans belonging to the type 4I were those people who were from the region and lived in the settlement in that region even after their marriage and the type 2C, those
who came from other settlements after their marriage.

It is supposed that the males and females with their teeth filed were basically from the region and considered as the closest blood relatives to the ancestors of the tribe in that region. They were of special lineage and their blood kinship might have been: mother-son, father-daughter, elder sister and younger brother, elder brother and younger sister, for example. With the relationship to their ancestors as their backbone of authority, they should have displayed to the full their power as political leaders and at the same time operated some tribal system together with the teeth-filed people belonging to other settlements.

List of figures, tables and plates

Fig. 1-4 Skeletal Materials with Teeth Filing from the Hobi Site (1, 2), the Ikawazu Site (3–11), the Yoshigo Site (12–19), the Inariyama Site (20, 21), the Kakekinomiya Site (22, 23), the Motokariya Site (24), the Ikazuchi Site (25), and the Koh Site (26–28).

Fig. 5 Distribution Map of the Sites excavating the Skeletal Materials with Teeth Filing.

Fig. 6 Upper Incisors with the Permanent Teeth perfectly appearing and the Filed Incisors.

Fig. 7 Teeth Filing from the Tzintzuntzan Site, Mexico.

Fig. 8 Teeth Filing in Africa (after Fülleborn, 1901).

Fig. 9 Very Points excavating the Skeletal Materials with Teeth Filing, in the Cemetery of the Yoshigo Site, Aichi Prefecture (large triangles and circles).

Fig. 10 Ditto, in the Cemetery of the Inariyama Site, Aichi Prefecture (large triangles).

Fig. 11 Models of the Inheritance of Men and Women practicing Teeth Filing.

Fig. 12 Wear of Upper Incisors at the Skeletal Material of the Tsukumo KY–1.

Fig. 13 Types of Pre-Hispanic Dental Mutilation in the America (after Romero, 1970).
Fig. 14 Lower Left Median Incisor not Filed from the Hirota Site, Kago-shima Prefecture, Yayoi Period.

Tab. 1 List of Human Skeletal Materials with Teeth Filing in Japan (MA: filed teeth, I, C and P: extracted teeth).

Tab. 2 Types of Teeth Extraction of Man with Teeth Filing.

Tab. 3 Measurements of Filed Teeth from Japan.


Pl. 2 23: Karekinomiya NS9♀, 24: Motokariya EH1♂, 26: Kō KG9♀, 27: Kō SM3♂, 28: Kō OS1♀.