

Mouths of Stone: Case studies from Ireland and North Australia on the ritualistic and symbolic use of stone.

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Kanner (1928) writes that symbolism is the driving force behind belief. It is all-powerful in humankind's relationship to one another and their environment. The human body, the centre of an individual's curiosity and existence, occupies a large symbolic realm in any group's social memories. Unlike any other organ, teeth grow into existence after birth. No other integral and visible part of the body can be removed or restored like teeth. Until modern times, dentition was "*one of the most important and also most dangerous processes in the life of an individual*" (1928, 26). Through the mouth one breathes, speaks, eats and drinks. For these reasons and more, no other part of the human body is surrounded by as much symbolism, on a global scale, as the teeth and the mouths in which they sit. There are many examples from many societies, past and present, where there are tangible relationships between the human body and stone in relation to both life and death.

Two archaeological case studies in Ireland and Australia have encountered specific symbolic use of stone in contexts related to mortuary and dentition.

Meaningful manipulation of the mouth in mortuary contexts is a significant action to undertake. In the case of Kilteasheen, Co. Roscommon, Ireland, stone had been utilised in mortuary practices that are not readily explained by conventional interpretation of burial contexts, where unmodified but preferentially selected stone was found forcibly inserted into the mouths of specific individuals.

Across the globe, Australian Aboriginal occupants of the Reynolds River region, Northern Territory, are known to ascribe meaning to crystalline quartz fragments at a natural geological feature as the "Teeth of the Ancestors". Research on prehistoric "Earth Mounds" in this region have found these unmodified quartz crystals had been selectively imported to specific sites. Interestingly, the quartz crystals are also found amongst a rich and diverse knapped stone artefact assemblage representing long term residential occupation of the site over the past 1000 years. We discuss the links in the archaeology and in the ethnography about the significance of finding these unmodified quartz crystals and their relation to symbolism and mortality at a site that represents a past living context.

This paper discusses the significance of stone and ritual symbolism in each case study and how each are linked by the symbolism of stone, the importance of the mouth, and its relation to mortality for both peoples in the past and present.

Kanner, L. (1928). "*Folklore of the Teeth*". New York, The Macmillan Company.