

On the Antiquity of Trisomy 21: Moving Towards a Quantitative Diagnosis of Down Syndrome in Historic Material Culture

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Abstract:

Down syndrome was first medically described as a separate condition from other forms of cognitive impairment in 1866. Because it took so long for Down syndrome to be recognized as a clinical entity deserving its own status, several investigators have questioned whether or not Down syndrome was ever recognized before 1866. Few cases of ancient skeletal remains have been documented to have Down syndrome-like characteristics. However, several forms of material culture may depict this condition. Within this paper the history of our understanding of Down syndrome is discussed. Both skeletal remains and different forms of material culture that may depict Down syndrome are described, and where relevant, debates within the literature about how likely such qualitative diagnoses are to be correct are also discussed. Suggestions are then made for ways in which a quantitative diagnosis can be made to either strengthen or weaken qualitative arguments for or against the diagnosis of Down syndrome in different forms of historic material culture.

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