The Nose And Beyond – No Nose

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The story of No Nose goes back many centuries. We do not know just when or where it started and probably never will.

On the battlefields of antiquity, the combatants not only killed their enemies but humiliated them too. Any captives that were taken were usually tortured and mutilated, and one of the most common ways was to cut off the nose. This is one of the most devastating mutilations imaginable. Without a nose, an individual is no longer seen as human but as an ugly, repulsive creature.

To avoid nasal and facial injury in battle, Greek warriors wore helmets with a nose protector. Cutting off the nose was not only a malicious means to punish an individual man; it was also a means to annihilate the culture of the defeated. The rampaging conqueror not only burned down the houses and temples of the vanquished but also destroyed the statues of their gods, heroes, and leaders. A quick and effective way was to deface them by chopping the nose off the statue with a sword (Fig. 1).

In 1984, when I visited the Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, I was struck by the large number of Greek and Roman busts that were missing a nose. In most cases the damage was clearly not due to a fall; it was caused by a blow with a sword. I counted a cut-off nose on 29 out of 68 busts. Recently, I learned that the museum has restored many of these noseless faces by giving them a new nose; these new noses are separately exhibited in a so-called Nasothek.

The put-on nose

A common way for a no-nose individual to hide his defect is to put on a false nose. The drawing of the substitute noses designed by Ambroise Paré (1510-1590), the famous French war surgeon, is well known (Fig. 2).

Many of us have also heard about the false nose that the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) wore almost all his life. While studying in Rostock, his nose was severely damaged in a duel with a fellow student to...
settle a quarrel about which of the two was the best mathematician. His nasal bones were destroyed by a blow of the sword, exposing the nasal cavities. Brahe masked this defect, first with wax, later with an artificial nose made of a silver-copper alloy (Fig. 3). In 1901, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of his death, his remains were exhumed, and traces of copper were found on his nasal bones. Nowadays, do people still run the risk of getting their nose cut off? One is inclined to say no. However, I remember the case of a Hindustan woman from Surinam, whose nose was cut off with a heavy scissors by her husband because of alleged adultery in 1966. The local ENT surgeon managed to restore the nose; the husband was convicted to 21 months in jail (Fig. 4). I also recall that we hosted an ENT colleague from Baghdad at our department some 15 years ago. He fled Iraq after Saddam Hussein ordered him to cut the ears off soldiers who had deserted the Iraqi army during the Iraq-Iran war.

**Necessity is the mother of invention: new noses in ancient India**

The art of making artificial noses, one of the oldest techniques in the history of surgery, originated in ancient India. There, a common sentence for crimes and adultery was to cut off the nose, a punishment called nacta. Prisoners of war were often mutilated in this way. It must have happened at a large scale, since a city in India was named Naskatapoor, meaning nose-cut town. Although cutting off the nose was also practiced as a punishment in ancient Egypt, as we read in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel and in the writings on Egypt of Roman scholars, we have no evidence that they were able to make new noses. We do have the Smith Surgery, a 17th century BC copy of a text from about 3000 BC, but it only presents three cases of how to diagnose and treat a broken nose. Nor is there any mention of nasal surgery in the annals of early Chinese medicine. The earliest description of reconstructing a nose that we know of is found in Chapter 16 of the Sushruta Samhita, one of the books of the holy Indian book Ayurveda. The following text dates from about 600 BC.