

The “idiot microcephalic” Battista. Reading of the anthropological and neuropsychiatric diagnosis published in 1912

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Abstract: We present a case of psychiatric and anthropological diagnosis of microcephaly published in 1912 in the Journal of Experimental Phreniatry and Forensic Medicine of Mental Alienations (*Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria e Medicina Legale delle Alienazioni Mentali*). From the reading of this publication, we analyse the point of view of the neurological sciences of that time. We also highlight how the contribution of Anthropology and Phreniatry was important for the study of “mental anomalies” when anthropometry was considered a scientific approach to evaluate mental abnormalities.

Keywords: Microcephalic, Phreniatry, Criminal Anthropology, Cesare Lombroso, Emilio Riva, Augusto Tamburini

L’“IDIOTA MICROCEFALO” BATTISTA: LETTURA DELLA DIAGNOSI ANTROPOLOGICA E NEUROPSICHIATRICA PUBBLICATA NEL 1912

Riassunto: Presentiamo un caso di diagnosi psichiatrica e antropologica di microcefalia pubblicato nel 1912 sulla Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria e Medicina Legale delle Alienazioni Mentali. Il documento rivela la prospettiva delle scienze neurologiche dell’epoca, nella quale si fondono i contributi dell’Antropologia e della Frenologia – in particolare dell’analisi antropometrica – nello studio delle “anomalie mentali”.

Parole chiave: Microcefalia, Freniatria, Antropologia Criminale, Cesare Lombroso, Emilio Riva, Augusto Tamburini

EL “IDIOTA MICROCEFALOSO” BATTISTA. LECTURA DEL DIAGNÓSTICO ANTROPOLÓGICO Y NEUROPSIQUIÁTRICO PUBLICADO EN 1912

Resumen: Presentamos un caso de diagnóstico psiquiátrico y antropológico de microcefalia publicado en 1912 en el Journal of Experimental Phreniatry and Forensic Medicine of Mental Alienations (*Revista Experimental de Freniatria y Medicina Forense de Alienaciones Mentales*). A partir de la lectura de este aporte se analiza el punto de vista de las ciencias neurológicas de la época y se destaca cómo el aporte de la Antropología y Frenología fue importante para el estudio de las “anomalías mentales” cuando la antropometría se consideraba un enfoque científico.

Palabras clave: Microcefalia, Freniatria, Antropología Criminal, Cesare Lombroso, Emilio Riva, Augusto Tamburini

An interesting publication entitled “The idiot microcephalic Battista”, published in the *Journal of Experimental Phreniatry and Forensic Medicine of Mental Alienations* (*Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria e Medicina Legale delle Alienazioni Mentali*), highlights how experts in psychiatry, anthropology and neurology at the time aroused a great deal of interest towards subjects who possessed “anthropological anomalies” at the head level (1,2).

Specifically, we would like to shed light on the clinical history of a person, named Battista, affected by microcephaly,” as reported in the article by the doctor Emilio Riva in 1912. The doctor explained that Battista (figures 1, 2) was examined during his life by professors Lombroso and Tamburini (1). The two scholars carried out a lengthy study on the subject, recording the progress and development of mentality, comparing anthropometric and psychiatric aspects.

In Dr. Riva’s discussion, there is the clear intention to shed light on new and interesting questions on the relationships that concur between microcephaly and “idiocy” in which psychic personalities could not evolve and develop normally as the somatic anomalies resembled “those beings on the zoological scale who are closest to them” (1). In particular, Riva explained the anamnesis of the subject. In 1868, as a newborn, the subject was taken to the hospital in Voghera and was enrolled under new patient number 5836. Nothing is known about his parents and relatives. However, it was reported that the Battista was the fruit of incest between mother and son.

The parish priest described the child as a “singular phenomenon” and advised the Administrator of the *Brefotrofio* to put him under special supervision.

The people in charge of his care called him “an abnormal subject and a microcephalic idiot, devoid of memory and intelligence and having the forms, actions and the characteristic tendencies of a monkey” (2).

When Battista was three and a half years old, Prof. Lombroso visited him and carried out anthropometric and psychiatric analyses on him which he later published in the “*Rivista Clinica*” [*Clinical Journal*] (3,4). It was reported that Battista possessed fine and delicate skin and the forehead, cheeks, neck and the limbs were covered in very thin hair. The head was very small, of oxycephalic form, with a receding forehead

and a very pronounced external orbital apophyses. The arcuate line of the temporal bone was salient, so as to form a true crest; the protruding face, with the incisors quite distant and the canines that were twice the normal size; the palate with a pointed arch and quite elongated. The genitals appeared more developed for a boy of his age, so much that they resembled those of a boy of about seven. His fingers were abnormally shaped and the big toe was noticeably longer than the other toes.

From a psychiatric point of view, Lombroso reported that sensitivity appeared normal while affection was missing, although he believed he noticed a discreet tendency to sociability. Battista’s language was rudimentary even though it was recorded that his memory of objects and people was fairly developed.

Lombroso, within his atavistic considerations, described some behavioral characteristics of Battista as “monkey-like”. Among these, Lombroso included the manifestations of contentment by bringing the hand to the nose or to the genitals. Refusal to grant him what he wanted resulted in Battista spitting in the face



Figure 1: Photo of Battista 10 years, in Riva E (1912) *L'idiota microcefalo Battista*. *Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria e Medicina Legale delle alienazioni Mentali* 38:341–368.

or hitting the person nearby. Moreover, the phenomena that Lombroso believed most unique and, as he claimed “very apelike”, were those of motility. Battista walked by hopping with his back bent and his hands carried forward. He did not sit down but crouched on the ground, keeping his head and limbs in constant motion. Battista showed an extraordinary aptitude for jumping and when he ate, he sniffed the food first.

Lombroso, of course, also took measurements of the skull, and he also calculated the cephalic index, as was the practice among positivist criminal anthropologists.

Dr. Riva reported that Battista, in the 1877, as a result of his violent tendencies, was interned in the Mental hospital of Voghera which at that time was directed by Prof. Tamburini.

Tamburini examined him and reported that the education he had received in that environment had brought him a little closer to being “human”, while still preserving many of his simian tendencies and habits.

When Prof. Tamburini was called to direct the Frenocomio of Reggio Emilia he wanted to take Battista with him in order to continue examining him.

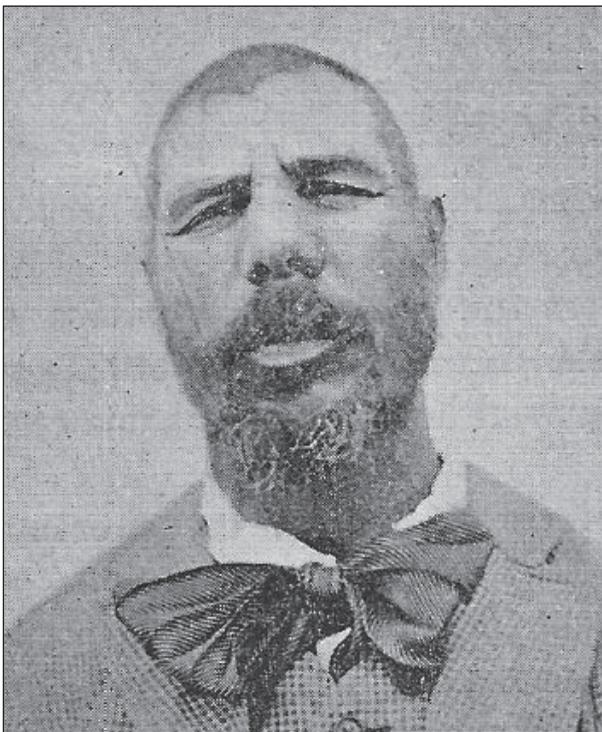


Figure 2. Photo of Battista adult, in Riva E (1912). The “idiot microcephalic” Battista. *Journal of Experimental Phreniatry and Forensic Medicine of Mental Alienations* 38:341–368.

The Professor was able to study in detail and the results were taken to the 3rd Congress of the Italian society of Phreniatry which was held in Reggio in 1880. Tamburini reported that Battista presented evident microcephaly accompanied by macroscopy, prognathism, fleeting of the forehead, a certain degree of oxycephaly, a remarkable cranial asymmetry due to posterior right and anterior left plagiocephaly and a certain difficulty in raising the head certainly due to the inclined position, in “pithecoïd mode”, of the occipital hole, which, according to the positivistic anthropology, occurred in anthropoids and in “lower idiots”.

There is a considerable lack of attention and memory, and for these shortcomings, Battista could not learn to read and write. Other psychic characteristics that Tamburini recorded are the lack of affection and egoism.

Riva reported that Battista was one of the best-known cases of microcephaly in the psychiatric world, writing “there is no Italian alienist who has not known or, at least, heard of Battistino” and also (ironically) “that many foreign alienists, in visiting the Psychiatric Institute of Reggio, could see and love the illustrious personality. It is emphasized, again according to the psychiatric, anthropological and positivist interpretations of that era, that these craniological anomalies were often found in microcephalic and “idiots” (5,6). Among these, the forehead was narrow and elusive backwards, retracted to the level of the frontal drafts; a rather pronounced front-sagittal crest; a sagittal crest marked at the level of the bregma and, as the most important anomaly was recorded, the presence of marked folds that occur at the occipital level.”

Riva reported that Battista’s cranial asymmetry depended on the early synostosis of sutures and was closely related to the development of the cerebral hemispheres.

It is clear that the description of Battista was a “product of the time”, of the positivist interpretations of that time and in particular of the Phreniatry, Psychiatry and Criminal Anthropology (7).

In the description and interpretation of anthropological anomalies, those atavistic aspects explaining degeneration were highlighted (8).

For example, the characteristic narrow forehead of the microcephalic subject, as also mentioned by Riva, was also found in criminals and, according to the

anthropological prejudices of the time, could be considered representative of a “racial character”. Moreover, the presence of a sagittal ridge in relief and the folds of the skin found at the level of the occipital bone were referred to as atavistic features. Moreover, a delay in the development of the wisdom tooth was associated with an atavistic feature.

The same happened for the development of wisdom teeth that referred to a phenomenon of degeneration.

According to the interpretations of the time, Battista possessed the human psychic type, however just the bare minimum. Specifically, according to Tamburini’s interpretations, each brain function existed in Battista but had a very narrow field of action and consequently “his mentality resembled that of a child and that of a savage (inferior races)”.

The association of “physical anomalies-character anomalies” represented the solid point in the diagnosis of Criminal Anthropology.

In this sense, the account of Battista’s clinical history will allow us to further underline how the psychiatry of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries made use of observational methods on anthropometric aspects and the classification of ancestral features in order to explain abnormal human psyches.

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