Perceived attractiveness and fecundity in youthful male and female individuals were determining factors in the selection of skulls for postmortem treatment in Melanesia deriving from both relatives and enemies. Strengthening the argument for the consideration of women and children in studies of skulls in archaeological and museum collections, this chapter reviews twentieth-century ethnographic evidence in Melanesia regarding mortuary ritual and presents a case study that uses dental x-rays to age a modeled skull from the Sepik River region of New Guinea. The Sepik River skull, determined to be that of a child between three and four years old, is unlikely to be a biological ancestor and provides a comparative example for recent work in the Neolithic Near East. However, slain enemies, and thus “outsiders,” could be considered ancestors and thus potentially become “insiders” by contributing symbolically to the proliferation and strength of the community because of the deceased's prowess in life.
includes discussions of osteological examinations, visual descriptions, iconography, taphonomy, and DNA, x-ray and isotope analyses to determine, for example, whether the skulls belonged to ancestors or enemies, as local or non-local residents. Emphasizing social identity and the use of the body in ritual, this book includes varied approaches to heads and skulls as both biological objects and as material culture. Bioarchaeological discussions of these skulls shed light on questions of identity as well as on cultural, economic, and political practices within past societies. Whether decorated, disembodied, or deformed, collected for display or hidden, or otherwise modified or curated, skulls, and their study serve to illustrate the potential of the abundance of information that can be obtained from a combined analysis of this notable part of the human body.

Contextualizing the Human Head
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in The Bioarchaeology of the Human Head: Decapitation, Decoration, and Deformation

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This introductory chapter discusses a wide variety of biological and cultural manipulations involving human heads and skulls recovered from archaeological and ethnographic contexts around the globe, notably, as they relate to early Neolithic modeled skulls from the Middle East. As a biological object subject to disease processes and patterns of physical activity, the skull is one of the most informative parts of the human body. Significant social meaning is revealed by focusing on the various ways in which the head was treated before and after a person's death. This chapter summarizes the case studies in the book and links the practices of decapitation, decoration and deformation with potential religious, economic and political motivations and questions of identity—namely whose skulls were thus treated and why.