Microcephaly in ancient Greece—the “Minoan” microcephalus of Zakros

Alexandra A. E. van der Geer · George A. Lyras ·
Sebastiaan B. van der Geer

Received: 28 March 2011 / Accepted: 13 April 2011 / Published online: 28 April 2011
© Springer-Verlag 2011

Dear Editor,

We appreciate the interest manifested by Dr. Syrmos for the published works on the “Minoan microcephalus of Zakros” [1]. The author reviewed several papers on this subject including our own. However, we would like to urge caution against the misconception that the microcephalic from Crete would belong to the species *Homo floresiensis*, an entirely different species than *Homo sapiens* to which the Cretan microcephalus naturally belongs. *H. floresiensis* is a fossil hominid which lived on the Indonesian island of Flores and that went extinct around 12,000 BCE [2]. The Cretan microcephalus, on the other hand, neither is a fossil human nor originates from Flores. There is no scientist who suggested a connection between the two islands as seems to be suggested by the author. Modern Cretans all belong to *H. sapiens* and so did the inhabitants of Crete during the proto-historical times. The author seems to have overlooked the fact that the papers he cited used the Cretan microcephalus in their studies on *H. floresiensis* to test the hypothesis that the fossil human from Flores suffered from a form of microcephaly or another neurodevelopmental disorder.

Furthermore, although the microcephalic individual from Cave Malakari on Crete is often referred to as “Minoan”, in reality, it belongs to the Protogeometric period, dated at about 3,000 BP [3, 4]. His burial and the excellent status of his dentition suggest that he was subject to a special treatment, considering the generally bad condition of adult dentition of contemporary individuals. Therefore, further research on this particular specimen might reveal interesting insights into the treatment of microcephalic children in protohistoric societies.

References

1. Syrmos NC (2011) Microcephaly in ancient Greece—the Minoan microcephalus of Zakros. Childs Nerv Syst. doi:10.1007/s00381-010-1381-x
2. Van der Geer A, Lyras G, De Vos J, Dermitzakis M (2010) Evolution of island mammals: adaptation and extinction of placental mammals on islands. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford
3. Platon N (1966) Anaskafi Zakrou. Praktika tis Archaeologikis Eterias tou etous, 1962: 142–168 [in Greek.]
4. Lyras GA, Dermitzakis DM, Van der Geer AAE, Van der Geer SB, De Vos J (2009) The origin of *Homo floresiensis* and its relation to evolutionary processes under isolation. Anthropol Sci 117(1):33–43

A. A. E. van der Geer · G. A. Lyras (✉)
Netherlands Centre for Biodiversity Naturalis,
P.O. Box 9517, 2300 RA Leiden, the Netherlands
e-mail: glyras@geol.uoa.gr

S. B. van der Geer
Technical University,
Eindhoven, the Netherlands