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A possible case of symbolic trepanation in Neolithic Central Germany

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Abstract Manipulations on prehistoric skulls such as trepanations are among the most fascinating palaeopathological findings though it is not always easy to make a firm diagnosis. This case study presents a lesion on the cranial vault of a Late Neolithic burial in Central Germany. The defect forms an almost lanceolate lesion along the sagittal suture, which had not penetrated the cranial vault. Similar lesions have been found in other areas of Germany and in the Balkans, where they have been interpreted as aborted, incomplete, or symbolic trepanations. This study explores potential causes for the unusual lesion and outlines possible therapeutic reasons for the manipulation of the skull. Comparison with similar cases also raises the question of a symbolic or ritual context. Thus, the study supports the hypothesis of symbolic surgical head manipulation in the European Neolithic.

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