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A High Score in Personal Hygiene

by Edward Brovarski

The Nile provided a ready bath for those who lacked a shower stall at home. Facial hair was limited to a trim moustache or a short chin beard. Only field hands (and men as a sign of mourning) wore fuller beards. Men, at least, appear to have shaved their bodies as well. Both the well-to-do and those not so affluent appear to have utilized the services of professional barbers, manicurists, and pedicurists.

Razors were of two different types. One was a blunt instrument with a wooden handle for shaving the head, the face, and the groin. The other was a rectangular, beveled razor without a handle, which may have been used for cutting nails. The sensation of shaving without soap or lather can only be imagined, although it is possible that oil or unguent was used to soften the facial hairs. Tweezers were used for plucking out hairs.

Both men and women wore their hair very short, but on formal occasions donned wigs made from human hair that was attached with beeswax to a mesh matrix. Why the Egyptians wore wigs is not clear, but the reasons may have included vanity and cleanliness. Old Kingdom combs were rectangular in shape and had short teeth suited for combing short hair. In one burial at Giza, six such combs were found in different layers of bandages over the head of a young adult female.

Men's clothing was simple and consisted of a linen skirt or kilt wrapped around the waist in bath-towel fashion and secured with a belt. Most were short, but paintings show that longer ones did exist.

Women generally wore a form-fitting dress, with plain or beaded shoulder straps. The dresses extended from just below the breasts to just above the ankles. Fashioned from a single piece of linen folded in half, the dress would have been hemmed on one side. In colder weather, men and women alike wore baglike tunics with long sleeves. The ancient tunics, however, were pleated horizontally. Women definitely wore wrap-around cloaks, and men are shown with a scarf or cloak thrown over one shoulder.

During most of the year, the weather in Egypt is, and was, warm or hot, and Egyptian attitudes toward nudity were different from ours. Children of both sexes ran around naked until the age of puberty. Agricultural workers and marsh dwellers (fishermen and fowlers) also went naked or wore little clothing, perhaps for convenience or through a desire to keep their good clothes clean.

The Egyptians liked and wore jewelry. Men usually wore a beaded collar and an amulet strung on a linen cord around their neck. Occasionally, they also wore one or two bracelets. In addition to beaded collars, accessories for women included beaded chokers (or dog-collar-type necklaces), bracelets, and anklets. For a time, it was popular to wear multiple bangles on the forearms. Queen Hetepheres actually had 10 silver bangles with inlaid butterflies of turquoise, lapis lazuli, and carnelian.

Nubia provided carnelian, but turquoise had to be imported from the Sinai Peninsula. Lapis lazuli, on the other hand, came from far to the northeast—from the area known today as Afghanistan. Few Egyptians, however, could afford jewelry made from semiprecious stones. Most wore imitation turquoise and lapis-lazuli beads that were made from faience (a self-glazing compound of ground quartz or sand, natron, and copper oxide).

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