

The nit-picking pharaohs

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HIS photograph represents the first material rather than anecdotal evidence that head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) infested the hair of the ancient Egyptians. The picture, taken with a scanning electron microscope by Ian Miller of the Medical School at the University of Manchester, shows the most ancient sample of head lice ever recorded.

Joann Fletcher of the Manchester Museum dates the sample, from a mummified Egyptian skull of the early dynastic period, at about 3000 BC. Fletcher, who is studying ancient Egyptian hairstyles and wigs, says that the sample predates the world's oldest confirmed infestation (on an American Indian) by 1000 years.

The slide shows a secondary infestation – two mites in the hatched case of a head-louse egg (nit). Fletcher says that further examination of the ancient head lice can tell us much more about the general state of health and hygiene of the Egyptians. She says that head lice prefer clean hair and feed several times a day on the blood of a host. They glue their eggs to the hair shaft near the scalp. They hatch after about 7 to 10 days.

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