

BACK NEXT SUMMARY CONTENTS ISSUE HOME

An Ancient Egyptian Wig: Construction and Reconstruction



Tweet



Joann Fletcher^{ID*} and Filippo Salamone

* Corresponding author: Department of Archaeology, King's Manor, University of York, YO1 7EP, UK.

Email: joann.fletcher@york.ac.uk

Cite this as: Fletcher, J. and Salamone, F. 2016 An Ancient Egyptian Wig: Construction and Reconstruction, Internet Archaeology 42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11141/ia.42.6.3>

Although only relatively recently the subject of serious study, hair and its grooming can be one of the best ways of gaining an understanding of past peoples. This is certainly the case with ancient Egypt, where forms of adornment and grooming regimes provide an alternative means of studying those beyond the 1% literate elite, and where its dry climate preserves human remains whether artificially mummified or not. Often present is the hair, which Egyptians throughout society treated in a wide variety of ways for a wide variety of reasons. The way in which the resulting styles were then portrayed in artistic representations can be used to establish a chronology for the whole pharaonic period (c.3100-30 BC). This can then be compared to the various types of hair remains to have survived (Fletcher [1995](#)).

As well as styling their own hair, the Egyptians also employed false hair. The earliest known example is a set of hair extensions from c.3400 BC, discovered in a plundered female burial at Hierakonpolis (Fletcher [1998](#)). Although such braids were subsequently attached to the natural hair of women and occasionally men throughout society, complete wigs were significantly more time-consuming to create and therefore more costly, with their use restricted largely to the elite.

Predominantly worn by elite men and women as status markers within Egypt's well-defined social hierarchy, wigs catered for the desire for elaborate hairstyles while serving a practical purpose. A wig shielded the shaven or cropped head from the harmful effects of direct sunlight and, unlike a head scarf, its mesh-like foundation base allowed body heat to escape. The practice also maintained high levels of cleanliness, the reduction or removal of the natural hair reducing the incidence of head lice (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) whose need to live close to the scalp's blood supply as their food source was countered by a wig that could be removed at any time (Fletcher [1994](#)). Wigs therefore became a way of maintaining ritual purity with a temple environment, in which the 'Egyptian priests shave their bodies all over every other day to guard against the presence of lice, or anything else equally unpleasant, while they are about their religious duties' (Herodotus II.36, trans. de Selincourt [1954](#), 143).

Quick Links

Introduction

Egyptian Wig construction

The Wig of Meryt

Egyptian Hair Pins

Romano-British frontier

Anglo-Saxon England

Viking Age Hair

Grooming the Face

Andean World

Middle Ages

Quattrocento Italian Heads

Post-Medieval London

Contemporary Britain

Afterword

As the subject of study since 1986, with all known examples of wigs, extensions and hairpieces recorded (Fletcher [1995](#), 353-424), the majority of wigs are now housed in the Egyptian Museum Cairo (Lucas [1930](#)). Yet one of the most intact examples is in the British Museum (Figure 1), having been obtained prior to 1835 on the West Bank of Thebes (modern Luxor). Although sometimes described as a 'woman's wig' (e.g. Freed [1982](#), 196), it is in fact set in the 'double' or 'duplex' style typical for male officials during the 14th century BC, with its two separate sections of curls and plaits (Fletcher [1994](#), 33; for a typical style of 'woman's wig', see Buckley and Fletcher [this issue](#)).



Figure 1: Wig of an 18th dynasty male official from Thebes (British Museum EA.2560). Image credit: J. Fletcher/Ancient Adornments Project.

Although the wig is extremely fragile and cannot be removed from the wooden display mount to which it was fastened in the 19th century, detailed examination by a professional wigmaker in 1975 nonetheless revealed construction methods as sophisticated as modern examples (Cox [1977](#), 70). Previous suggestions that a wig of this size (circumference 59.69cm) could be heavy enough to cause parietal thinning of the skull (Smith [2000](#), 36) therefore seemed unlikely, so when the wig was first examined by the authors in 1987, its weight was calculated at between 0.5kg and 1kg, revealing it was also as light as modern counterparts (Fletcher [1995](#), 386, 397).

Following a second, more detailed, study by the authors in 2008, an exact replica of the wig in its original condition was created as part of the 'Ancient Adornments Project' (Fletcher [2015](#), 69). With no evidence of any interior padding with palm fibres or grass noted in later examples, nor the 'sheep's wool' (British Museum [1922](#), 264) referred to in early editions of the museum's guide book, the British Museum wig was constructed entirely of human hair (Cox [1977](#), 67). As an expensive commodity in Egypt's barter economy, hair was listed alongside gold and incense in ancient accounts' lists (Griffith [1898](#), 39, 48-50), and no doubt obtained from those wishing to exchange their hair as part of a trading transaction. In the case of the British Museum wig, some of the hair may also have been supplied by the owner of the wig.

Once a sufficient amount had been collected, the hair would have been cleaned and then separated into

several hundred individual lengths containing approximately 400 hairs in each length (Cox [1977](#), 69). The wig was then manufactured on a wooden wig mount, again very similar to modern examples. Firstly the foundation base was created using multiple lengths of plaited hair laid horizontally and vertically to create the characteristic mesh, each length fixed in place by a combination of either knotting or folding the plaits back on themselves. The mesh was further secured with an application of a 'setting' mixture made of two-thirds beeswax and one-third imported conifer resin. Warmed prior to application it then set hard, the melting point of beeswax of between 140Â°F and 149Â°F (60Â°-65Â°C) making it capable of withstanding even Egypt's extreme climate (Cox [1977](#), 69-70).

To anchor the subsequent lengths of hair to this mesh foundation, an inch of the root end of each length was looped around the horizontal mesh and pressed between thumb and forefinger against the waxed hair stem. A 'sub-strand' of approximately 15 hairs was then wound around the hair stem to secure it further (Cox [1977](#), 69).



Figure 2: Reconstructing the wig as the plaited underpanel is attached to the reticulated mesh base. Image credit: F. Salamone/Ancient Adornments Project.

With 'several hundred' (Cox [1977](#), 67) lengths of hair originally ranging from approximately 30 to 38cm in length attached at the back and sides of the mesh base from ear to ear, these would have been plaited individually once *in situ* to create the underpanel (although the reconstruction employed pre-plaited lengths of hair for reasons of economy). The remaining lengths of naturally wavy hair of approximately 18cm in length could then be added to create the top section, each of which was then individually styled to create annular 'stand-up' curls (approximately 1.27cm in diameter).



Figure 3: Historical hairstylist Filippo Salamone recreating the British Museum wig as part of the 'Ancient Adornments Project' Image credit: Ancient Adornments Project/Firefly.

The recreation of the wig took a professional hairstylist and wigmaker approximately 200 hours or around one month to complete, which would obviously have been even greater if the plaits had been styled once attached to the mesh as in the case of the original (Figures 2-3). Known to have been produced in wig-making workshops (Laskowska-Kusztal [1978](#)) and within the hairdressing facilities of temples, such high-status headwear was worn on a regular basis by society's male and female elite for over two thousand years and was clearly of great importance. It is therefore time scholars paid it as much attention as the ancients themselves so obviously did.

Bibliography

- British Museum 1922 *British Museum Guide to the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Egyptian Rooms, and the Coptic Room*, London: The Trustees.
- Cox, J.S. 1977 'The construction of an ancient Egyptian wig (c.1400 BC) in the British Museum', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* **63**. 67-70. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3856302>
- Fletcher, J. 1994 'A tale of wigs, hair and lice', *Egyptian Archaeology* **5**. 31-33.
- Fletcher, J. 1995 *Ancient Egyptian Hair: a study in style, form and function*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester.
- Fletcher, J. 1998 'The secrets of the locks unravelled', *Nekhen News: Newsletter of the Friends of Nekhen* **10**. 4.
- Fletcher, J. 2002 'Ancient Egyptian hair and wigs', *The Ostrakon: Journal of the Egyptian Study Society* **13(2)**. 2-8. http://egyptstudy.org/ostrakon/vol13_2.pdf
- Fletcher, J. 2005 'The Decorated Body in Ancient Egypt: hairstyles, cosmetics and tattoos', in L. Cleland, M. Harlow and L. Llewellyn-Jones (eds), *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. 3-13.
- Fletcher, J. 2015 'The most democratic form of adornment: hair and wigs in Ancient Egypt', *El-Rawi: Egypt's Heritage Review* **7**. 66-71.
- Freed, R. 1982 'Wigs and hair accessories', in E. Brovarski, S. Doll and R. Freed (eds), *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom 1558-1985 BC*, Boston: The Museum Of Fine Arts. 196-198.
- Griffith, F.L. 1898 *Hieratic Papyri from Kahun and Gurob*, London: Bernard Quaritch.
- Herodotus (trans. de Sélincourt, A.) 1954 *The Histories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Laskowska-Kusztal, E. 1978 'Un Atelier de perruquier à Deir el-Bahari', *Etudes et Travaux* **10**, 84-120.
- Lucas, A. 1930 'Ancient Egyptian wigs', *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* **30**. 190-196.

Smith, G.E. 2000 *The Royal Mummies*. London: Duckworth.

The comments facility has now been turned off.

[BACK](#) [NEXT](#) [SUMMARY](#) [CONTENTS](#) [ISSUE](#) [HOME](#)



Internet Archaeology is an open access journal based in the [Department of Archaeology, University of York](#). Except where otherwise noted, content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0](#) (CC BY) Unported licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that attribution to the author(s), the title of the work, the Internet Archaeology journal and the relevant URL/DOI are given.

[Terms and Conditions](#) | [Legal Statements](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Cookies Policy](#) | [Citing IA](#)

Internet Archaeology content is preserved for the long term with the Archaeology Data Service. Help sustain and support open access publication by donating to our [Open Access Archaeology Fund](#).