



Ancient Egyptians

Pioneers in Natural Cosmetics

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The mention of Ancient Egypt conjures up not only images of pyramids, hieroglyphs and mummies, but also the names of the two most famous individuals from that remote civilization: Tutankhamun and Nefertiti. Ever since 1912 when the bust of the queen was dug up from a sculptor's workshop, she has been the symbol of eternal beauty, transcending millennia and cultural divides. The portrait of the queen was sculpted in a period of Egyptian history when the canon of representation was detached from the conventions of typically Egyptian art in the way that we have come to recognize it. The bust has an immediate appeal because it is so incredibly life-like.

A civilization that was able to convey such universal esthetic appreciation in art must have had high standards in real life. Judging not only from statuary and painting, but also from remains of mummies, the Egyptians were endowed with strong features, good teeth and thick hair; yet they still felt the need to improve on nature. In so-called primitive civilizations, cosmetics had a ritual significance of which traces survive even in our own.

From the dawn of Egyptian history, around 3000 BC, cosmetic vessels formed an important part of burial equipment. Papyrus scrolls dating from around 1700 to 1300 BC provide us with details of preparations used in those days. These had, no doubt, been perfected through trial and error. It is interesting to view the ancient prescriptions and raw materials used in the light of modern herbal tradition.¹

Hygiene

Cleanliness was highly regarded in Egypt. Anyone who worked in the service of a god had to be ritually pure, washing and shaving the head every day to avoid parasites and foul odor. But even for ordinary people, the ideal was to be clean and dressed in crisp, white clothes. This was achieved without the use of soap and detergents, but with plenty of water. For ritual purification, a species of granular soda appears to have been added.² A quantity of salt,³ which

may have served a similar purpose in this life or the next, was found in a wooden "salt cellar" among funerary equipment buried around 1400 BC.

Oral care: In order to maintain clean breath, the Egyptians chewed lumps of natron,⁴ a natural soda consisting of sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate that occurs plentifully in various locations in Egypt. A cow's milk gargle was prescribed for treating an afflicted tongue.⁵ Another mouth rinse was made up of honey and water mixed with goose dripping, frankincense, cumin and yellow ochre (E 700). A sweet-smelling breath was assured by chewing pellets of a substance, known in Egypt as *kapet*, made of dry myrrh, mastic, cyperus grass, cinnamon bark, sweet flag and a few more herbs. This was ground fine, mixed into honey and heated. The dried pellets could also be used to fumigate the house and clothes (E 852).

This last remedy has a long and fascinating history of its own.⁶ It is the original version of *kyphi*, frequently referred to by the Greek and Roman writers. This came to be a scented paste, based on raisins, honey and wine with added fragrances, intended to be burnt in the manner of incense for general purification in the temples and as a means of communication with the divine. It was revived in the nineteenth century and marketed as an aphrodisiac.

There is no evidence of the ancient Egyptians ever using toothpaste and toothbrushes. About a hundred years ago, the peasants used ground tamarisk leaves to cleanse their teeth.⁷ A branch of *Salvadora persica*, a tree which is now native to southern Egypt and the Sudan, would also have performed the task as it has done for centuries among Muslims.⁸ Juice of the tree has even been included in a modern toothpaste.

Deodorants: In order to combat body odor, the Egyptians placed little balls of incense-flavored porridge in their arm pits (E 711). A deodorant body rub was made of ostrich egg and tortoise shell roasted with gallnut from a tamarisk tree (E710).

A third prescription dealing with the same problem brings us face to face with one of the major obstacles in an attempt to appreciate the skills of the Egyptians in the field of cosmetics and medicine: the problem of translating the individual ingredients which went into a preparation.⁹ Although some present no difficulties at all, there are still a great many which do. Because of the nature of hieroglyphic writing, it is possible to determine whether a given substance is a plant, a mineral, or of animal origin. But beyond that, the identity of many items remains conjectural. In this case, a ball of ground *djaret* is rubbed into the skin (E 709). This *djaret* was, for many years, translated as coluquint. Recent research suggests that the pulp of carob pods is a more likely candidate.¹⁰ *Djaret* is also used applied to the eyelids "to open the sight," here mixed with fermented honey and kohl (E 399), or with fermented honey alone,¹¹ in which case the remedy doubled for treating white spots of a burn (E 506). It is also an ingredient in numerous remedies to be taken for digestive disorders (E 44, 153; as vermifuge E 80, 84). In classical¹² and Arabic¹³ medicine, carob was used for this latter purpose, as well as in external treatment of pustules. Coloquint pulp, which is poisonous in large doses, is an irritant to sensitive skin. On the other hand, it is useful as a moth repellent.¹⁴

Cleansing cream: We have a better understanding of the cleansing creams, because jars containing the actual substance have been discovered. Around 1450 BC, three ladies of the court of Tuthmosis III were given an expensive burial with exquisite funerary equipment. This included jars of a substance which was obviously considered of prime importance in the Hereafter: a cleansing cream made of

animal or vegetable oil and lime, or possibly chalk.¹⁵ A similar substance, of a somewhat later date, was found to consist of fatty matter, wax and powdered limestone.¹⁶ If we study the preparations listed in papyrus scrolls, we find similar ingredients, but with honey as the vehicle. The specific purpose is stated: "1 part powdered calcite; 1 part red natron; 1 part Lower Egyptian salt; 1 part honey, ground to a paste and rubbed into the body." (E 715)

A preparation for a similar purpose listed in the papyrus scroll (E 714) consists of equal parts honey, red natron and salt ground to a paste; in all its simplicity, a most efficacious face wash, which can easily be prepared and tried out by anyone who wants to emulate what the Egyptians used 3500 years ago. The "red" natron was probably natron which had been tinted by iron occurring in the area. The reason for specifying this red natron must be that the finished preparation would be of a reddish hue. Thus, it probably was considered of cosmetic value in addition to its purifying properties. The use of powdered chalk is strongly reminiscent of certain cleansing grains currently manufactured by a British company.^a

Color Cosmetics

Rouge: Red ochre, which again owes its color to the presence of iron, was used to cosmetically disguise scars caused by burning. The lumps of ochre, which occur naturally on the surface of the desert, were ground with kohl, presumably to make the color even darker, mixed with sycamore juice and applied (E 505). This "juice" was presumably sap from *Ficus sycomorus*, the biblical sycamore, which was still in use in Egyptian folk medicine by the turn of the present century to treat a number of skin ailments. The juice would have sealed off bacteria.

Interestingly, a jar of 26.8% red ochre, mixed with organic matter, probably a vegetable or tallow grease with perhaps some gum-resin, has survived from a burial some 4000 years old. Nearly a thousand years older, and dating back to the very beginning of Egyptian history, are jars found during excavations near modern Cairo containing fatty matter mixed with red oxide of iron and calcium carbonate. Palettes and grinders of a similar early date still show the stains of the red material which they once contained.¹⁷ A few years ago, red ochre featured prominently in cosmetic preparations both in Europe and the United States. In a powdered state, it was marketed as a rouge with pharaonic ancestry in suitably "ethnic" packaging.

Lip tint: Red ochre combined with fatty matter may also have been used as lip tint. In Egyptian painting and polychrome sculpture, lips are generally not rendered in a different color from the rest of a woman's complexion, be it yellow or a light red. But there are exceptions, the bust of Nefertiti being one of them. In addition, an illustrated papyrus scroll contains a drawing which shows a woman applying lip tint with a stick or brush.

Nails: Whether the Egyptians were in the habit of tinting their nails remains an open question. Some mummies have their hands stained with a dye which appears conspicuously similar to henna, but this could possibly have occurred

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during mummification and not in real life.¹⁸ Several of the medical prescriptions include red or yellow ochre in oil as a remedy for ailments of nails of fingers or toes (e.g., E 619). In paintings, nails are invariably shown in brilliant white. However, some statues display red finger and toenails. Maybe the application of red dye to the nails was thought to prevent disease from occurring in the first place.

Eyes: The Egyptians had the largest and most attractive eyes in history, and everything was done to emphasize the fact in this life and the next with eyepaint.¹⁹ Malachite (a green ore of copper obtained from Sinai and the eastern desert) and galena (a dark ore of lead quarried near Aswan and on the Red Sea coast) were the two most commonly used. Both have been found as grave goods: as fragments of raw material, wrapped in bags of linen or leather; as stains on palettes where the substance was ground, or in its final form ready for use, either as paste or powder. The powder was stored in little jars having a variety of fancy shapes or in segments of hollow reeds. When made into a paste, it was kept in shells. Over the millennia the paste dried up and shrank, leaving an impression of the receptacle on the now-solid mass. Analysis has not shown any trace of fatty matter in these preparations. Hence, it is assumed that the powder was simply mixed with water, or a mixture of gum and water. Nowadays the powder, known as kohl, is applied simply by using the humidity of the eye itself while passing the kohl stick along the edge of the eyelids. No other vehicle is required.

The exact composition of ancient Egyptian kohl has been investigated, for galena was not the only source, although the most common.²⁰ The Egyptians also used oxide of manganese,²¹ oxide of iron, brown ochre and carbonate of lead, among others. The use of antimony appears to have been far less common than has been stated in the literature, though a few cases have been recorded.²² Present-day Egyptian kohl consists of soot of various origins, from frankincense and almond shells to safflower.²³

Kohl was also used as a preventive treatment for eye diseases. For overnight treatment kohl was mixed with goose fat (E 389), or other minerals were added such as lazuli, malachite and ochre, all of it mixed with honey (E 390).

As another treatment for the eyes, an eye wash was prepared from ground celery and hemp (Ram A26), "celery; hemp; is ground and left in the dew overnight. Both eyes of the patient are to be washed with it early in the morning."

The affliction is not specified. It is of interest, however, that hemp is used in the treatment of glaucoma in modern herbal medicine.

To cool the eyes a compress was made using liquid from emmer grains steeped in water overnight (Ram A25-6). We may perhaps assume that it also had an effect on swollen eyes, for a similar preparation—with honey and wine added—was used as a poultice to reduce swelling in the legs.²⁴ In modern herbal tradition, cooked barley grains are used in a poultice for sores.

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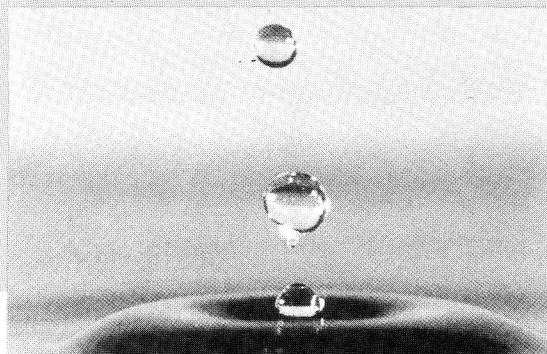
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In order to make the hair grow and prevent it from turning grey, the Egyptians would apply an ointment made of juniper berries and other plants (as yet unidentified), kneaded with oil and heated.²⁵ To promote hair growth, chopped lettuce was placed on a bald patch (E 467), or the skull was rubbed with equal parts of fir oil and another (unidentified) fatty matter (E 473).

Grizzling could also be combatted with the blood of black animals in order to transfer the blackness to the sufferer. Here we are into sympathetic magic. This no doubt is also the case with an ointment made of unguent of lion, hippopotamus, crocodile, cat, serpent and ibex prescribed to stimulate hair growth (E 465). One remedy was specifically recommended as having worked wonders for the mother of King Teti ca. 2500 BC. It consisted of a dog's leg, hoof of ass and "kernels" (?) of dates boiled with oil (E 468). It is obvious from remains of mummies that it was not uncommon to dye the hair a bright red. It is possible that henna was used for the purpose. The tree was well-known in antiquity, and the best was said to grow in the Nile Delta.²⁶

Unwanted body hair was removed by shaving, or by applying depilatory creams. One such cream consisted of the boiled and crushed bones of a bird, fly dung, sycamore juice, gum and cucumber, heated and applied, presumably to be pulled off when cold (H 155).

Burnt lotus leaf steeped in oil was also used to cause hair removal. But a ruse was called for here, for it was meant to be applied to the head of a hated woman! (E 475)²⁷

Dandruff was treated with powder of ground and roasted

barley and emmer, mixed into equal parts of grease. In a severe case, the patient should be turned upside down and the treatment should be followed up with anointing with fish oil on day 2, "hippopotamus oil" on day 3, and (?)ladanum (a resin of *Cistus* spp.) on day 4, with a daily application of sourdough (E 712).

Paintings, reliefs and sculpture of women, and to some extent men, show them with an abundance of hair which exceeds what most would have been able to sport in real life. Wigs, made of human hair, were used for special occasions. The curls and plaits were held in place by means of beeswax which was heated before being applied. When set, the shape would last, but with the disadvantage that dust and dirt would easily adhere to the slightly sticky surface.²⁸ Jars of a substance found to be a mixture of beeswax and resin no doubt served a similar purpose.²⁹

Skin Preparations

The Egyptians had a variety of oils and fats at their disposal for keeping their skin soft and smooth. Before the days of bank notes and coins, workmen's wages were paid in kind. This frequently included oil, specifically intended for anointing (as opposed to oil for human consumption and lamp oil). Animal fats were most often derived from cattle or geese; whereas, the most common vegetable oils included balanos, castor, linseed, moringa, safflower and sesame. Olive and almond oils were imported from Greece around 1400 BC, before the cultivation of those trees was established in Egypt.

Tradition has it that Cleopatra bathed in donkey's milk. This may be so. But her ancestors used cow's or human milk to treat their skin, leaving the milk of donkeys for internal remedies. In the form of set milk, it was used rubbed into the skin to prepare it for subsequent application of a poultice or similar treatment (E 642). Plain yogurt remains one of the simplest and most efficient skin applications.

Body ointment to revive and refresh the members consisted of ox and pork fat to which was added among other things: frankincense, wax, ground cinnamon, ground juniper and coriander seeds. It was heated, applied as a bandage and then apparently rubbed in with the addition of myrrh (E 652).

Wrinkles were treated with a daily application of a mixture of equal parts of gum of frankincense; wax; moringa oil; and cyperus grass (the green parts of the plant that gives us tiger nuts), mixed with fermented plant juice. "Try it, and you will see for yourself!" the prescription adds (E 716). Another consisted of a vegetable oil with honey and emmer sprouts(?), made into a dough and pounded in viscous fluid. This was used to wash the face every day (E 719).

A Rejuvenating Elixir

By far, the most interesting prescription is one which involves the highly complex preparation of just one ingredient: fenugreek seeds. The resulting ointment would turn an old man into a young man. It is quoted here in full.³⁰

"The beginning of a book of making an old man into a young man. You must collect a great quantity of fenugreek, about two sacks full. Then you shall break them up and leave them in the sun. When they are completely dry, you shall thresh them like you would

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thresh barley. Then you must winnow them down to the last pod. All that has come out of it must be measured and sifted. Divide it into two portions, one consisting of the seeds, the other of the pods, of equal quantity. Then you shall place them in water, the two portions having been combined. Knead it to a dough. Place it in a clean pot on the fire and boil it for a long time. You will recognize when it is done when the water has evaporated and they dry up until they are as dry as straw with no moisture at all. Take them away from the fire. When they have cooled, placed them in a pot and wash them in the river. Wash them thoroughly. You will know when they are washed enough when you taste the water in the pot and there is no bitter taste left. Then you shall leave them in the sun spread out on a piece of laundryman's cloth. When they are dry, you shall grind them on the mill stone until they have been reduced to small pieces.

Then you shall steep them in water and make them into a soft dough. Then you shall place them in a vessel on the fire and cook them for a long time. All the time you must skim the oil which has risen with a spoon. Place it in the jar whose inner surface has been plastered with clay, smooth and thick. Skim the oil and strain it into the jar through a cloth. Then you shall place it in a jar of stone and use it as an unguent. It is a remedy for illness in the head. When the body is rubbed with it, the skin is left beautiful without any blemishes. It is a million times efficient."

Before the invention of the technique of distillation in the fourth century BC, the extraction of any concentrate of a plant was implemented by maceration or decoction. Fenugreek is rich in vitamins, nitrates and calcium. It contains an abundance of mucilage which is used for emollient purposes. The constituents are not dissimilar to cod liver oil. Although it is now largely used as animal fodder, the sprouted seeds make a delectable salad herb, and the use of the seeds in human medicine goes back a long way. In European folk medicine, fenugreek tea is recommended as a fortifying beverage for convalescents. A poultice made of ground and boiled fenugreek seeds with a little vinegar added is used to treat swellings and wounds, as well as arthritis and rheumatism.

In Egypt, seeds have been discovered in burials dating back to 3000 BC. They were also part of the funerary equipment of Tutankhamun. Here they were found in a pot mixed with lentils. In present day Egypt—where the herb is cultivated—as well as in other parts of the world, fenugreek is taken to encourage lactation.³¹ In antiquity, fresh fenugreek and honey in equal proportions were taken by a woman to facilitate childbirth (E 801). An alternative remedy for the same purpose consisted of a suppository made of fresh fenugreek, incense, onions, beer, fly dung and an unidentified plant (E 802). It is possible that these properties, along with those implied in the lengthy prescription just quoted, explain the presence of the seeds in a tomb. The main purpose of any funerary equipment or tomb decoration was to facilitate perpetual life in the form of rebirth in the Hereafter. Any rejuvenating or reproductive connotations that the herb may have had would make it eminently suitable for that purpose.

Although the entire argument rather hinges on our trans-

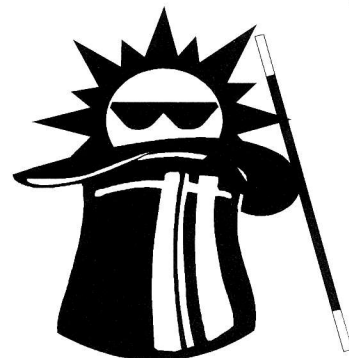
lation of the crucial word *hm3yt* as "fenugreek," the actual find of the seeds in a funerary context is significant. Under the heading "fenugreek," Dioscorides, the eminent herbalist of the first century AD specifically mentions a decoction of fenugreek as having been used in herbal medicine, specifically to treat the vulva. The mere fact that he gives his version of an Egyptian name for it ("*itasin*") indicates that the use of the plant extended to Egypt.³² The use of *hm3yt* as a remedy to be taken by mouth is well established, but this concerns us less for the present purpose, which is that of an ointment claimed to wipe years off your skin. Perhaps it was this very ointment which was given to one of the most famous characters in Egyptian literature: Sinuhe, who had to flee his country and spend many years as a bedouin abroad, only because he had overheard preparations for a plot to kill the king. On his return he had a truly royal welcome. "Years were caused to pass from my body. I was depilated, and my hair was combed. I was outfitted with fine linen and rubbed with the finest oil"

Perfumes³³

Egyptian perfumes consisted of oils or fats to which various fragrant substances had been added. In addition, it was the custom to manufacture a fragrant paste based on fruits such as raisins or sycamore figs. This was intended to be burnt as incense or, as we have already seen, to be chewed or taken internally.

Egyptian scents were famous throughout the ancient world. One was known simply as "The Egyptian." The main ingredients of the most illustrious fragrances were cinnamon,

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cassia, myrrh and resin, but in different proportions. The timing of the various stages of preparation was significant, the last ingredient to be added producing the most dominant effect. Wine was added to lighten the scent, or to give it a certain lift. In addition to the highly spiced fragrances, we know of perfumes based on lilies, marjoram and henna flowers.

Remains of unguents have been discovered in burials, notably that of Tutankhamun. It has been estimated that some 350 liters of fragrant material were buried with the king when he died at the age of 17 or 18 around 1339 BC. Shortly afterward the tomb received uninvited visitors who specifically came to take away the scented grave goods. They wrenched off the lids and necks of the vessels and left fingermarks when they scooped out the contents. Some of this material, which was still plastic at the time of discovery, was analyzed in the 1920s.³⁴ The results showed that it contained about 90% animal fat and 10% resin. An up-to-date chromatographic and pollen analysis is urgently required, but samples of the material remain unavailable.

Specimens of even older scent (ca. 2000 BC) were found to contain gum resin with splinters of aromatic wood.³⁵ It is interesting that a wall-painting from a tomb dating to around 1400 BC, showing the manufacture of scents, includes a picture of a man who appears to be engaged in making wood shavings.

Conclusion

The ancient Egyptians left a record of a civilization which clearly prized, among other things, personal grooming and beautification. It is interesting to compare the similarities of

the products used thousands of years ago with those of today. It may also prove instructive or inspiring to consider the ingredients that are not commonly used in modern personal care products, particularly those with other herbal folklore on which to draw.

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