



The Heritage of Egypt

Volume 2 Number 2 Issue 5
May 2009

Egypt £12.30 - Europe €6.6 - UK £4.4 - USA \$3.3

Eternal Youth

Lise Manniche

The ancient Egyptians were very concerned with the passing of time and its effect on the fragile human frame. Their interest went deeper than just looking good. During their life on earth, few Egyptians could have been expected to reach an age beyond some 30-odd years. Most people would never have known their grandchildren. This would have provided an incentive to marry at a fairly early age. A genre of literature, perhaps invented by the Egyptians, the so-called Wisdom Texts, gives advice on how a man should interact with fellow Egyptians, especially those of a higher rank, but basic instructions also concern marriage: 'Take a wife when you are 20 years old, so that you may have a son while you are still young.' Keeping in good health was important, and the same texts suggest moderation in all things: food, drink – and women. Were it not for the ignorance of germs, and, in the case of women, the risks of childbirth, in theory the variety of available foods would have provided an adequate base for a healthy diet and a long life, certainly in the higher echelons of society where there would have been no shortages.

The quest for eternal life

When commissioning a statue or the decoration of a tomb chapel, the brief of a member of the elite to the artist must clearly have been to depict the owner in the prime of life, with a firm, muscular body, a full head of hair and an erect posture, occasionally with his wife at his side. If he was a member of the clergy, he was, however, obliged to shave his head for reasons of purity. In the wall decoration of a tomb, those who came to join the tomb owner during the annual, religious feasts conform to this ideal and show the same characteristics. There are no children present here, apart from occasionally those immediately related to the tomb owner, usually shown as adolescents or adults. When grandparents are present they are indistinguishable from their offspring.



ill. 1. A tomb owner and his wife sniffing lotus flowers. Tomb of Roy at Thebes, 19th dynasty.

There is a specific reason for this. The idea was not to reflect the various age groups of a family, as it would have been in real life, but to project a picture of dynamic people in the procreative phase of their life in order to generate on the tomb wall an image of the sexual energy that was required for the miracle of rebirth in the Hereafter. This is spelled out by depicting people at the appropriate age, and by a wealth of pointers such as being heavily made-up and scented, wearing semi-transparent



ill. 2. The Egyptian lotus still grows in the Orman Garden in Cairo.

garments, and displaying intimate gestures. It is further emphasized by straightforward symbols relating to rebirth such as the lotus flower, which is being worn, sniffed and presented [ill. 1-2]. Egyptian art is imbued with these sexual notions which all relate to the idea of a continued existence after death. On the tomb wall, with a view to obtaining such eternal life, the essential idea to get across was one of dynamic, youthful energy.

The king, above all, projected an image of everlasting vigour. Such is the message he conveyed on the walls of his temples whether they were meant to be seen by his subordinates or not. He is strong on the battlefield and for ever active presenting offerings to the gods. Because of his position he has access to what may be called the elixir of life: the divine milk which he suckles from the udder of a cow (one of the forms of the goddess Hathor) or from the breast of a goddess [ill. 3]. Drinking this precious liquid rejuvenates him for ever, on

earth and beyond.

Looking good on earth

On a more mundane note, the Egyptians were obviously concerned about their bodies during their brief life on earth. Cosmetics were used not just for funerary purposes, placed in the tomb in bags or vessels of pottery, stone or glass, but to delight and enhance men and women alike, and preparations were made to keep the skin smooth and white. Some 3500 years ago experts recommended this body scrub which can easily be prepared at home today (substituting chalk for calcite): '1 part powdered calcite; 1 part red natron; 1 part delta salt; 1 part honey ground to a paste and rubbed into the body.' Wrinkles were treated with a daily application of a mixture of gum resin, wax, moringa oil (Arabic: *ban*) and *Cyperus esculentus* (Arabic: *habb el-aziz*) ground together. A liquid gum resin on its own is said to be equally successful.

Because of the fact that refined sugar was absent from their food, the Egyptians ought to have had decent teeth. But mummies show severe wear and tear, in many instances probably caused by the amount of dust and grit left in the flour used for the most important item in their diet: bread.

Greying hair was not desirable. It is rarely represented in art, and they used herbal remedies to stop the process. Some sympathetic magic would have been involved in a preparation consisting of oil boiled with the blood of a black ox or calf, or the horn of a black gazelle was made into an unguent with oil. The hair of some mummies, notably that of Ramesses II in the Cairo Museum, have a reddish tinge which would appear to suggest that the Egyptians dyed their hair. However, this may have occurred during mummification, or it is a case of discoloration which took place naturally over the millennia.

A remedy for youth

If the damage had been done and signs of ageing presented a problem, there was hope yet if one was acquainted with 'The beginning of the book of making an old man into a young man'. It is of some interest that the male and not the female sex is involved here. The



ill. 3. King Ramesses II drinking divine milk. Temple of Beit el-Wali, 19th dynasty.

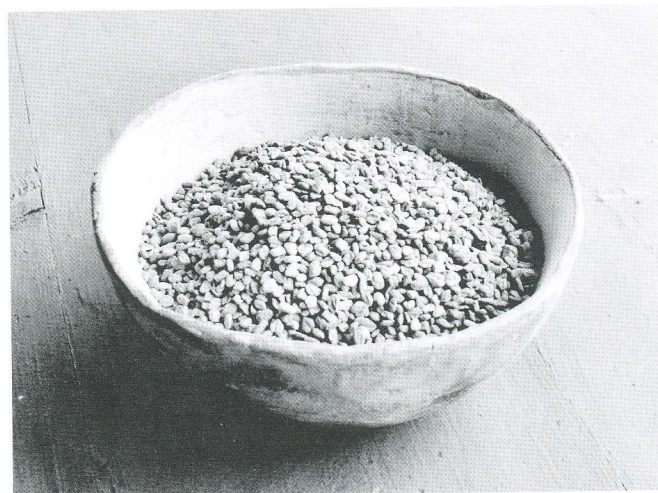
treatment is external, and it is not specified if the purpose is purely cosmetic or whether the aim was total rejuvenation, inside and out.

You must collect a great quantity of *hemau*, about two sacks full (if the reference is a sack of grain, we are talking about some 50 kilograms). Then you shall break them up and leave them in the sun. When they are completely dry, you shall thresh them like you would thresh barley. Then you must winnow it 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. They 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 recognise 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, place 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. You will know when they are done when the pellets of oil rise to the surface. All the time you must skim the oil which has risen with a spoon. Place it in a jar whose inner surface has been plastered with clay, smooth and thick. Skim the oil and strain it into a 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.

The crucial issue here is of course the nature of the word *hemau*. The suggested translation of this single ingredient is fenugreek [ill. 4]. Fenugreek (Arabic *helba*) is a herb producing pods with 10-20 seeds of a yellowish-brown colour, which are almost odourless unless subjected to heat. They are rich in vitamins, nitrates and calcium. The seeds are thought to



ill. 4. Fenugreek from Siwa.

encourage lactation and heal inflammations. Nowadays they are an ingredient in some curry spices. In Egypt they are added to bread, and in the Siwa oasis they are boiled with water and sugar (3 tsp *helba* and 4 tsp sugar to 4 cups water) for 10 minutes to make an invigorating, hot drink in the winter, or, medicinally, to be taken while having a 'sand cure', allegedly to prevent sweating. In England fenugreek seeds are sprouted and included in salads.

There can be no doubt that the Egyptians knew fenugreek, for seeds were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (c. 1350 BC). The Greek herbalist Dioscorides (1st cent. AD) says that the Egyptians called it *itasin*, a word which is totally different from *hemau*. His remedy was used to treat a female complaint. This does indeed somehow relate it to the use of *hemau* in pharaonic Egypt, for with honey it was taken to induce childbirth, or it was an ingredient in a suppository for the same purpose. Whatever the philological implications, we seem to be in the field related to hormones.

Survivals

The knowledge of the beneficial properties of herbs goes back as far as human civilisation. The many remedies recorded in writing by the Egyptians give substance to such a claim. Although some genetic changes may occur, a herb may be supposed to maintain its properties for thousands of years. Herbalists today will in many instances acknowledge the use of ingredients which were equally familiar to their colleagues in antiquity [ill. 5]. This case of 'fragrant archaeology' is particularly interesting in a composite remedy used today under the name of *tiryac*. It consists of a

number of herbs individually mixed to suit the needs of a patient. Since the Middle Ages it has been used to treat serpent bite – for which purpose reptile skin was included – but it may also be taken on a regular basis to keep people young and prolong their life, almost comparable to a modern ‘rescue remedy’. A number of the components of *tiryac* have a parallel in a composite preparation which may go back as far as to the age of the pyramids: *kyphi*. We have details of its ingredients with many variations from the Greco-Roman period, recorded on the walls of the temples of Edfu and Philæ [ill. 6] and in manuscripts by the classical writers. One prescription from AD1574 records *kyphi* as being itself an ingredient in *tiryac*. Those who will today consult a herbalist at al-Azhar for personalised *tiryac* is thus perpetuating a tradition that may go back 4500 years.



ill. 5. Guests being attended to at a banquet. Tomb of Nakht, Thebes. 18th dynasty.

Perfect old age

Strangely, while being engaged in their quest for eternal youth, at the same time the Egyptians strove after 'good old age'. They even put a figure to their thoughts: 110 years was the perfect score, and this span of years is quoted in some tales in order to imply that the person in question was imbued with great wisdom. Few Egyptians achieved it, although it appears that king Pepi II of the 6th dynasty (c. 2400 BC) ruled for 94 years, having ascended the throne at the tender age of 6. One official



ill. 6. Door to the unguent storeroom at Philæ, with a prescription for *kyphi* written in the upper left corner.

of the New Kingdom (c. 1000 BC) is quoted on his tomb wall to have lived to the age of 88.

The resurrection of ancient mummies, as portrayed in certain popular films, has until now been proven to be pure fantasy. In fortunate circumstances, DNA material may be available, and perhaps one day we shall see a clone of an ancient Egyptian walking the streets of London, although, regrettably, with his cultural baggage left behind...

Lise Manniche graduated from the universities of Copenhagen and Cambridge. She teaches Egyptology in Copenhagen and is editor of *Papyrus*, magazine of the Danish Egyptological Society (www.daes.dk). She has appeared in a number of television programmes and is the author of many books including:

- *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt*, London 1987 (also in Arabic 2002)
- *L'art égyptien*, Flammarion 1994
- *Egyptian Luxuries. Fragrance, Aromatherapy and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt*, American University Press, Cairo 1999
- *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal*, 2nd ed., British Museum Publications 2006 (also in Arabic 1993)