

ARCHAEOLOGY

Glass Eyebrows

Archaeologist Reconstructs the Story Telling How They Were Stolen off the Coffin of an Ancient Egyptian Queen

By EMILY C. DAVIS

ROBBERS stole the eyebrows off the queen's coffin.

It sounds ridiculous, perhaps. But it happened. It happened in the tomb of a queen of Egypt, Meryet-Amun. Royal coffins in Meryet-Amun's time had portrait heads on them with much inlaid jewelry-work.

Of course, the stealing of a pair of blue glass eyebrows was no great matter of importance. The same burglars removed articles of far greater value from the queen's tomb. Yet, the eyebrow incident is significant. It gives you an idea of how thorough and efficient a job the robbers of ancient Egypt did when they went down to the lonely city of the dead at Thebes to plunder a queen's burial.

Queen Meryet-Amun has come to knowledge of the modern world through the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Noting an unexpected pit entrance in the royal cemetery at Thebes, the explorers dug their way into the depths of a tomb in the cliffside. That discovery was in 1929. Since then, the Museum's Egyptologists have explored and studied the tomb, and the full report of what they have found has now been published by H. E. Winlock, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and former leader of its Egyptian expedition.

Most of the tombs of Egypt are notable for some particular distinction. Queen Meryet-Amun's tomb will go down to fame because of its two thorough robberies, and the subsequent efforts of long-suffering government officials to patch up the damage. By remarkable scientific detective work, Mr. Winlock reconstructs these happenings in the disordered tomb.

Meryet-Amun, Mr. Winlock explains, was an Egyptian who lived from about 1490 to about 1440 B. C. She was the daughter of a pharaoh, and the grandniece of that well-known feminist Queen Hatshepsut, and she looked like both her father and her great-aunt. Meryet-Amun was a small, slender person, with

a fine, noble head and delicate features. When she died at about the age of fifty, her hair was brown without a trace of gray—but she did add to its effect of thickness by a mass of false braids.

This little Egyptian princess was queen of Egypt only for the last few years of her life. She rose to that highest rank, when her brother Anemhotpe II succeeded to the throne. The young heir to the throne took for his consort his middle-aged sister. Rigid Egyptian custom prescribed that the throne might be occupied only by a man who was royal and divine and it was very customary for a brother and sister of the royal line to marry.

Tomb Planning Was Exciting

The most exciting duty of the queen's brief reign, probably, was the planning of her tomb in the royal cemetery across the Nile from the capital city of Thebes. By the time Meryet-Amun came to the throne, the pharaohs and their wives had abandoned the idea of raising conspicuous pyramids. The royal family was too famous for its wealth, and the pyramids were too easily burglarized, as royalty had learned to its sorrow. The only recourse of the pharaohs was to dig tombs in the limestone canyons of the desert and to trust sand and wind to hide the entrances from Egyptian tomb racketeers.

For greater secrecy, the workmen engaged for Meryet-Amun's tomb worked after dark. Night after night, one squad excavated the corridor and burial chamber, and another squad carried baskets loaded with chips up the steps to a dump outside.

Mr. Winlock knows that they worked a night shift because of a tiny clue. This is a lamp niche at the foot of the pit steps. Outside in the starlight, the carriers needed no light to dump their debris. In the depths of the tomb, the miners had torches or lamps. But on the stairs at night, a fixed light was needed. Hence the niche.

Before the tomb was quite finished, the queen died. The pharaoh her husband and brother had her furniture and

her baskets and boxes of luggage moved across the river to the tomb, and a set of magnificent coffins prepared. And doubtless official Egypt went home satisfied that everything was safe and secret.

And so it was for a while, perhaps for as long as 400 years. But when the Metropolitan Museum explorers entered the tomb, about 3,500 years after the queen's death, their eyes fell upon a scene that would have horrified Queen Meryet-Amun and King Anemhotpe.

The corridor leading to the burial chamber was strewn with baskets and broken dishes and other debris. Of the queen's beautiful furniture, all that the thieves had left were a few tiny gilded chips.

The tomb robbers, it appears, had come to their work equipped with saws and other tools for a complete haul. They had no need for the chairs and other palace furniture. Such things intact were too hard to transport and were dangerously conspicuous to sell. Instead the robbers were after the precious metals so lavishly plated over the furniture. And when the metals were stripped off, the thieves could still dispose of planks of cedar, sycamore, and tamarisk wood. So, by the light of lamps set in broken saucers, the vandals chopped with their tools in the shadowy echoing tomb, and wrecked household furnishings that were undoubtedly works of art.

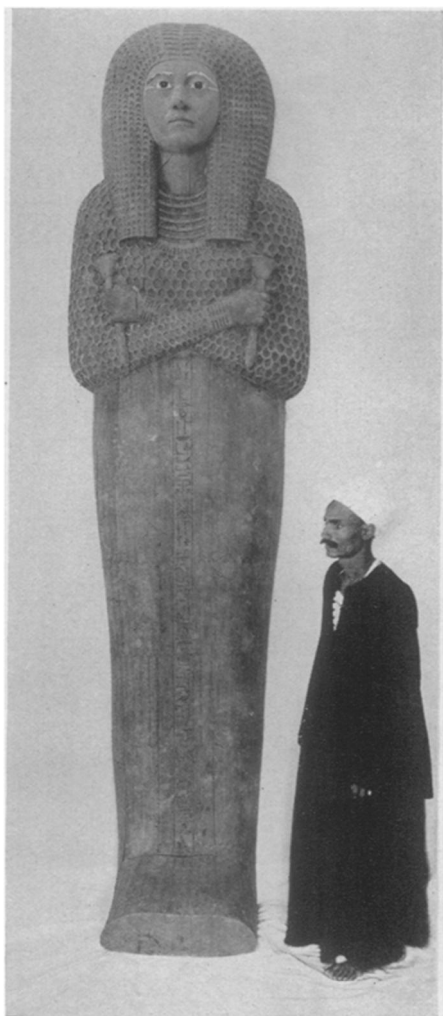
Queens of Egypt were noted for their exquisite toilet articles. Whatever Meryet-Amun brought to her house of the dead to make herself beautiful was ruthlessly carried off by the burglars. They left just one of the queen's beauty aides. That was her false hair, of which she had quantities, in addition to the braids attached to her coiffure. One basket held ten small plaits. Another held three large plaits. False hair did not appeal to the tomb robbers.

Destroyed By Age

As the queen had been dead 400 years when the robbery took place, the invaders had trouble handling some of the "antiques."

Mr. Winlock writes:

"The big baskets were so many centuries old and their contents were still so heavy that every time the thieves moved one of them its bottom fell out, and baskets, lids, and bottoms must have



BARED BY THIEVES

This is the huge second coffin of Queen Meryet-Amun. Thieves stripped off the sheathing of rich gold and even stole the blue glass eyebrows off the queen's portrait.

been strewn over the antechamber."

The robbers left not one trace of gold or silver. Even alabaster seems to have had its value, Mr. Winlock supposes, for only broken chips of ointment jars were left, and three of the alabaster canopic jars containing the vital organs of the mummy were missing.

The main prize on which the tomb robbers focused their attention was, of course, the nest of cases containing the queen's mummy. No less than three coffins, each shaped to resemble the human form and adorned with the queen's portrait, encased the mummy. And outside of that there was a huge, angular sarcophagus.

The coffins themselves were jewels, considering the gold that plated them and the fine inlay work. And in the heart of the nest of glittering cases, the robbers well knew they would find

the queen herself decked in her loveliest ornaments.

Mr. Winlock gives a vivid description of the systematic way in which the thieves attacked these coffins:

"They chopped, sawed and broke up the sarcophagus and the third coffin because both were so bulky that that was the easiest way to get into them. They seem to have considered that some of the bigger pieces of wood were worth taking, however, for they had sawed through the corner dovetails to separate the planks without breaking them, and all the larger boards were missing. The second coffin was opened without much damage. The lid was wrenched away, but that only broke the edges opposite the tenons. Then it was methodically peeled, inside and out. The sheets of gold were ripped up, nails and all, and the linen backing of the gilded gesso was stripped off the head, the shoulders, and the column of inscription, bringing the inlays with it. The eyebrows and eyelids were pried out. They were glass and therefore remeltable, while the stone eyes themselves were left as worthless.

Damage Repaired

"The first coffin was treated in the same way, and while it had no inlays, the vulture head which was probably of solid metal was well worth removing. If there was a mask on the mummy, it was taken away bodily. The bandages were then slit with a knife down the front from crown to toes, and the inner wrappings, hardened with resin, were hacked with an adze as far as the jewelry went."

Laden with plunder, the thieves sneaked out of the royal cemetery. It is possible, Mr. Winlock says, that the damage was discovered by inspectors going the rounds. But more likely, he thinks, in a few hours the news of such robberies leaked out by gossip and rumor from house to house.

"If so," he continues, "the police or their informers would have had hints of the theft in short order, and we may take it that inspectors were at the tomb very soon after it was broken open. As the date of their inspection is fixed closely to November 25, 1048 B. C., we may place the robbery during the few days just preceding. When a preliminary investigation had fixed the seriousness of the damage done in the tomb, a party of restorers was sent there with full equipment. There was a scribe who was supplied with an official seal, there were embalmers—or bandagers

at least—and there must have been workmen, who brought their own food intending to stay until they had thoroughly cleaned up the tomb. The party brought linen to rewrap the mummy, flowers to redecorate it, and offerings to lay at its feet. They brought paint and plaster and strips of glass to refinish the coffins, and they brought boxes and pots for their materials."

These government employees swept up the rubbish in the disordered tomb and piled it in the corridor and the antechamber. Among the old rubbish they threw the ragged bandages that had wrapped the queen's mummy originally and that bore the evidence of her identity in hieroglyphic writing.

Then the restorers went to work on the two inner coffins and the mummy. Examining the evidences of their work, Mr. Winlock reports that they brought fine linen sheets from government stores, but, strange to say, some of the linens had been used and laundered.

Mr. Winlock proves this by pointing to the ink markings on the linen. Such labels as "Temple of Amun" were written in ink brown and faded from the laundry. When the mummy of the queen was re-wrapped, the scribe of the party wrote the official date and record on the outer linen wrapping. This ink, in contrast to the laundered writing, is a brilliant, bluish black.

The official docket on the mummy gave the date, corresponding to about November 25, 1048 B. C., in our calendar, and the added note: "This day the inspection of the King's Wife, Meryet-Amun."

The restorers probably wound up their task in a day. No gold and jewels were replaced. The workmen painted a sign over the wood, disregarding the original decorations. On the inner coffin, they painted the queen's hair blue, and her face yellow. For eyebrows, ill-fitting pieces of blue glass were hastily set in plaster.

Before the paint on the coffins was dry, the workmen had to move them, and in the process the paint was badly smeared. Both coffins became liberally spotted with sweaty hand prints.

When the queen's mummy was once more inside the two fairly neat but no longer regal coffins, the restoration party laid floral offerings and three saucers with other offerings on the floor. They then gathered up their tools and sealed the place.

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