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THE HEAD OF AN OLD MAN (NO. 37/883) IN  
THE BRITISH MUSEUM

BY

H. R. HALL

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Head in sandstone.  
Brit. Mus. No. 37883.

*Scale:  $\frac{1}{2}$ .*

## THE HEAD OF AN OLD MAN (NO. 37883) IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

By H. R. HALL

With Plates xi and xii.

One of the finest examples of Egyptian art of its period is the white quartzite sandstone head of an old man, No. 37883, in the British Museum, exhibited at the present time in the Fifth Egyptian Room on a special stand, as befits its pre-eminence as a work of art. It formed part of the Harris Collection, and was bought by the Trustees in 1875 with the rest of that collection. Its place of origin was very probably Thebes. Its date in my opinion is the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, *circa* 700 B.C.

The head is broken off from a statue, roughly life-size. The old man wears a rather heavy plain wig, the hair of which is wavy, not curled, and is disposed in six horizontal waves all round from the crown to the shoulders. It is set behind the ears, which are completely exposed and pushed a little forward by it, and comes down low on the forehead. The portrait is that of a man of between 70 and 80 years of age, judging from its appearance. The eyes are small, much wrinkled, and hollow; the face heavily lined, especially round the mouth; the skin is stretched taut over the cheekbones, which thus appear higher than perhaps they did in youth. Crow's feet are not indicated at the corners of the eyes: the skin was drawn too tight over the skull to show them. The nose was well-formed, prominent, and perhaps slightly aquiline, but is unluckily broken off at the tip. The mouth is small, tightly closed, the upper lip long, thin, but well formed, the lower lip comparatively full. The chin is small but well shaped; its lower portion is broken away.

The wig hides the wrinkles on the forehead, but the evidence of the eyes and mouth, and the prominent bony structure of the skull are enough to show us that the subject was aged. And the bust is one of the finest Egyptian portraits of an old man that exists, rivalling those of Amenophis son of Hapu and that of Nsiptah at Cairo. In one way it gives a more pleasing impression than those of Amenophis, since it is not so senile. This man, if not younger in age, is younger in spirit than the Eighteenth Dynasty sage, is more alert, more master of himself. And he is a much more intelligent and resolute and less self-indulgent person than Nsiptah. It is very much the face of a typical British judge in his seventies (a likeness to which possibly the wig contributes!). It is proud and composed, yet not unhumorous: the mouth has a slightly ironical, almost quizzical smile, rendered with extraordinary subtlety. It is determined, yet by no means devoid of human kindness; narrow in outlook, perhaps, but enlightened. In any case it is the face of a most intelligent member of the ruling caste of his time: that we can see at a glance.

The question is: when did he live? When the object first came into the British Museum, Dr. Birch very plausibly assigned it to the second half of the Eighteenth Dynasty. Now this was, given the uncrystallized knowledge of the 'seventies, a very good guess indeed, in view of what we have since learned of the peculiar character of the work of that time. But, though superficially it may remind us of the heads of Amenophis, it is questionable whether this was a correct attribution. Birch himself abandoned this view later in favour

of one that regarded it as a portrait of a Hyksos, because, forsooth, in the early 'eighties it was fashionable to regard the Hyksos, like the Hittites, as Mongols, to seek in their high cheekbones (if they had them) and the Hittites' pigtailed proof of the Mongolian origin of both, and to call everybody in ancient Egyptian art with high cheekbones a Hyksos, and everybody with a pigtail a Hittite. But just as other persons besides Hittites have worn pigtailed and have not necessarily been turned into Mongols thereby (I may instance Frederick the Great, King George III, George Washington, Lord Nelson, and in fact every European male person of the eighteenth century above the age of sixteen!), so everybody with high cheekbones and small eyes is not necessarily a Mongol, more especially when the eyes are not of the almond-shaped variety. And those of our ancient noble certainly are not that. They look small, but that is mainly because they are withered from age. The cheekbones are accentuated for the same reason, though no doubt in youth also they were high, since high cheekbones are common enough in Egypt.

While the Mongol character of the Hyksos was still credited the two great heads of a king with high cheekbones found by Naville at Bubastis and now, respectively, at Cairo and in the British Museum (No. 1063), were assigned to an Apepi. And the remarkable colossi found by Mariette at Tanis, the fish-bearers at Cairo, the bearded head at Rome<sup>1</sup>, and the "Hyksos" sphinxes were all considered to bear this Mongol imprint. But now that it is obvious that the Hyksos were not Mongols at all, but Semites, the two Bubastite heads have been transferred from Apepi to Amenemhet III on the ground of their apparent relationship to Twelfth Dynasty portrait-heads, and possibly to Amenemhet's in particular. And the sphinxes follow them, the Hyksos name on them being but a later addition like others, but whether back to the Twelfth Dynasty or even further is not yet certain; while the strange fish-bearers, the Rome head, and their like have been pushed back to the archaic period of the Third Dynasty, on account of the undoubted likeness between their type and that of the head of king Zoser and other heads of that early dynasty found at Saqqârah by Mr. Firth<sup>2</sup>. And our head under discussion must also be rescued from the Chinese associations into which it has been thrust. It is not Hyksos: that is quite certain. Is it not, however, Twelfth Dynasty, like the "Amenemhet" heads? There is a good deal to be said for this attribution. The type of wig is if anything in favour of it, the large size and the position of the ears are not against it. (We shall see however that their treatment is not characteristic of the Twelfth Dynasty.) The fact that the ears are not pierced is against the late Eighteenth Dynasty attribution of Birch, as most ears were then pierced, whereas under the Twelfth Dynasty this fashion had not yet reached Egypt. The wig is certainly more of the Twelfth than the Eighteenth Dynasty type, even that of the early Eighteenth. And the stark truth of the portrait would seem at first sight to guarantee a Twelfth Dynasty date. But if we look again and more carefully, I think we shall see in it a delicacy absent from Twelfth Dynasty work. And it is more sophisticated, so to speak, than that of the Eighteenth. There is a careful fineness and delicacy about it that we do not find until the work of the late Theban school in the early Saïte period. The known work of this school with which I would compare it are the heads of Montemhet or Mentumehet and his son Nsiptah at Cairo, the prince of Thebes at the time of the Assyrian sack in 663 B.C. and his successor. The treatment of the old face, with its subtle suggestion of the lines of age, and above all the sympathetic handling of the old and tired eyes, seem to me to recall more than anything else the head of Nsiptah<sup>3</sup>. The

<sup>1</sup> In the Museo delle Terme: FECHHEIMER, *Plastik der Aegypter*, 59.

<sup>2</sup> See CAPART, *Chronique d'Égypte*, 81 f.

<sup>3</sup> See the illustration in MASPERO, *Art in Egypt* ("Ars Una" Series), Fig. 462, p. 241.



Head in sandstone.  
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*Scale:  $\frac{1}{4}$ .*

ears, too, the fat, rather flabby old ears, are treated in the same way in our head and that of Nsiptah, very differently from the outstanding, jug-handle-like appearance of the usual Twelfth Dynasty ears, though disproportionately large like them (whereas Saïte and Eighteenth Dynasty ears are usually better proportioned) and as unnaturally placed: a defect of most Egyptian heads, and the only one that we can see in our head. Montemhet's head is more vigorous of course, but in it too we see the same Saïte sophistication, the same more delicate edition of the realism of the Pyramid-period and the Twelfth Dynasty. I have not considered at all the possibility that our head is of the Pyramid-period: that is ruled out at first sight. It has nothing in common with the style of that time except the fact that it is a good portrait. It must be either Twelfth Dynasty or Saïte Theban of 700-650 B.C., and for the reasons stated above I believe it to be of the later age. Montemhet's head has rather more in common with the work of the Old Kingdom, but we see the difference between it and the portraits of that time: it could not belong to any other period than the early Saïte, even did we not know whom it represents.

In regard to details the fact that the ears are unpierced is as good evidence in favour of Saïte as of Twelfth Dynasty date. We know that earrings were worn at the later period, though possibly not as commonly as under the Eighteenth Dynasty: but the piercing is not represented in the statues. Probably only small earrings were worn, not the studs that made great holes in late Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Dynasty ears. The wig is as possibly Saïte as Twelfth Dynasty, though its horizontal waves are often found under the Twelfth Dynasty, and not often under the Twenty-sixth. Amenophis has them under the Eighteenth; but he is obviously wearing his own hair, like Montemhet, whereas our old man and Nsiptah as obviously are wearing wigs. Nsiptah has the typical full Saïte wig without that wave or line, either horizontal or vertical, that is usual under the Eighteenth Dynasty when the elaborate curled wig is not shown. Amenophis's hair is parted in the middle and combed down on either side like that of the extraordinarily naturalistic late Eighteenth Dynasty head of a young man at Florence (in Fräulein FECHHEIMER's *Plastik der Aegypter*, Fig. 63, miscalled a woman<sup>1</sup>), but this young man's hair covers his ears, while that of Amenophis is put back behind them in a rather old-fashioned way, revived in the Saïte wigs; the usual Eighteenth Dynasty wig covered the upper half of the ear, as Montemhet's hair does. But his hair is cut in a very unusual and individual style of his own, showing his baldness in front and turning up behind in a way reminding us of the celebrated short coiffure of the Marquis of Granby in the eighteenth century, which was considered extremely eccentric in that long-haired and bewigged age. Our old man's wig might perhaps be decisive for a Twelfth Dynasty date did not the other characteristics of his head, notably the treatment of the ears and eyes, the delicate suggestion of old age, the subtle suggestion of a smile, more subtle than anything the Twelfth Dynasty can show, decisively incline us to attribute it to the Saïte-Theban period.

We have no other criteria to guide us: the stone, a white quartzite sandstone, is very probable under the Twelfth Dynasty, when quartzite sandstone was much in favour. But it is equally possible under the Eighteenth or Twenty-fifth—Twenty-sixth Dynasties.

The height of the head is 9 inches (22·7 cm.).

<sup>1</sup> The face to me is distinctly that of a young man, not a woman; and women did not wear their hair in this way without any confining band when no wig was placed over it. Amenophis's head is enough to show that men under the Eighteenth Dynasty often did wear their own hair parted in the middle in this way, and we find the same coiffure in the sketch of the painter Huy (*Zeitschr. f. äg. Spr.*, XLII, 130, reproduced in *Journal*, I, 202).