

## Hair-Offerings: An Enigmatic Egyptian Custom

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### Introduction

The custom of offering hair is not unique to the ancient Egyptians. The ancient Greeks and recent *fellahin* of Egypt practised it, and many small-scale societies still practise similar customs to the present day (Frazer 1922). Nevertheless, it is a ritual in the socio-religious life of the ancient Egyptians that has received little scholarly attention.

The Egyptians did not record the reasons that lay behind the offering of hair. Using a holistic archaeological approach, which combines both ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence, insights may be gained into the ancient remains of these rituals and practices.

There were various forms of hair-offerings in ancient Egypt. One form was the 'lock of youth' offered to the god Horus. The 'sidelock of youth' was cut off in the rite of passage that marked the entry into adulthood of a boy or girl. It was then offered to Horus, possibly signifying separation from childhood. The name of this ceremony was 'the tying around of the fillet' (*ts-mdh*), probably in imitation of Isis tying a fillet around the head of her son Horus as he set out in search of Seth, the murderer of his father Osiris (Davis 1986). Other forms of hair-offerings include locks of hair being offered in temples, buried in pits, and simple balls of hair, of which several examples have been found placed in tombs. One of the more cryptic customs was placing locks of hair inside mud balls. 'In reality, what is called "the sacrifice of the hair" includes two distinct operations: cutting the hair (separating), and dedicating, consecrating, or sacrificing it (binding oneself to the sacred world)' (van Gennep 1960: 166). Most rites of passage consist of a preliminal (separation) phase, a liminal (transition) phase, and a postliminal (incorporation) phase. This is not always the case; in hair-offering rituals, the liminal phase is often dropped, or is of very minor importance (van Gennep 1960).

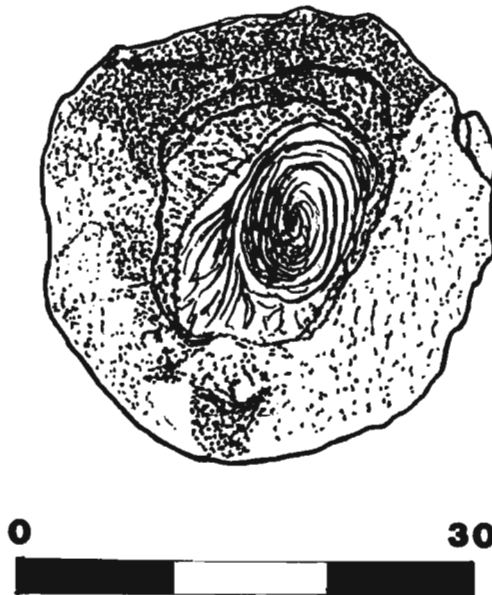
As seen from anthropological sources, many customs and rituals can endure for a very long time, passing through many religious and social changes with only minor changes in application and purpose. 'What is clear about ritual is how to do it but its meaning may be clear, complicated, ambiguous or forgotten... it may mystify or clarify depending on cultural context' (Parker Pearson 1982: 100).

Why offer hair in the first place and what might have been its significance? 'A votive offering is not simply an artefact, it is the surviving part of an act of worship' (Pinch 1993: 339). It may also be a gift in fulfilment of a vow. Rituals to link a votive object with its owner could be carried out at any stage of its manufacture. Inscribing a name into an object is the most obvious way of linking it with its owner. It is also possible to achieve such an association by reciting the possessor's name in the course of the ritual. In a comparative manner, more personal ways of linking an object were also used in ancient Egypt: 'pottery fertility figurines might for example, have incorporated drops of menstrual blood from a female and/or semen from a male donor or the spittle or hair of donors of either sex' (Pinch 1993: 340). It may be suggested that skin and fingernail parings could also be used in this way. Hair and fingernails, unlike semen, urine, spittle and menstrual blood, are not fluid, and thus can remain as a trace material if the person

leaves or dies. Hair has more social, ritual and sexual significance than nail parings, and it is more suitable to be used as an offering. 'In its form, colour, length, and arrangement it is a characteristic distinguishing an individual as much as a group, and is easily recognised' (van Gennep 1960: 167). Colour, form (type), texture and length are all characteristics retained by the hair, even after cutting.

### Evidence of hair-offering

Clay balls containing locks of hair have been found at El Amarna in the workmen's village. Some of these balls have been stamped with the impressions of signet-rings (Peet and Woolley 1923: 66). Unfortunately, the provenance of these clay balls from Amarna was not recorded exactly, and we are unable to determine whether they came from household shrines or elsewhere in the village. Clay balls of 30mm in diameter and with a plain uninscribed surface were found by Petrie at Kahun in a XXth Dynasty grave (Compton 1916) (Fig. 1). When the Manchester Museum opened the balls, they were found to contain locks of 'reddish brown human hair, apparently infantile' (Compton 1916: 128). The balls themselves were made of sun-dried Nile mud mixed with some shell fragments. On the outer surface of one ball, a piece of linen was still attached, possibly indicating the material in which they were originally wrapped (Compton 1916).



**Figure 1** One of the XXth Dynasty clay balls from Kahun, containing hair. Now in the Manchester Museum

Mud balls were further discovered in a IVth Dynasty *mastaba* tomb at Abydos. Most of the balls were buried in the north-east corner of a small *mastaba* of Cemetery D in the sand filling (Peet 1915: 8-9). Three out of the 40 balls, which ranged in diameter from 20 to 40mm, were cut open. Two were found to contain fragments of papyrus reed or sheet, and the other a small piece of linen. All but one of these balls were inscribed

with a grid pattern and the signs (𓄎𓄏𓄐) *ḥtm*, which translate into 'to make a contract'. It would be of interest to ascertain if the uninscribed ball contains the same material, or perhaps a piece of hair instead, in comparison to the other inscribed balls that were cut open and inspected by the British Museum in 1915 and which contained papyrus. The contract that was established was an agreement between the deceased and the priesthood to ensure that the burial rites were carried out correctly (Griffith 1916). When the rites were completed, the ball was placed in the tomb so that the number of balls may perhaps correspond with the number of contracts entered into with the priesthood. The actual contract or agreement itself was probably written on the encased piece of papyrus or linen (Griffith 1916: 253-4). Garstang found similar clay balls to the ones at Abydos, excavated at Reqaqnah 'in a small hole bored into the top of the wall of Mastaba 50, near the north-west corner' (Garstang 1904: 32). These clay balls, however, had incised drawings of animals (and possibly humans), as well as inscriptions that were similar to those on the Abydos balls. The tomb and balls date to the Vth Dynasty and are of slightly later date than the Abydos balls.

If the exact context of the Amarna clay balls had been properly recorded, it would be easier to determine whether or not a connection between the contract balls and the hair balls exists. It is still possible, however, to suggest that the hair balls were intended for the same purpose as the contract balls, and that the hair symbolised the contract, making a more direct physical bond with the priesthood. However, it is equally possible that two completely different types of ritual involving clay balls were in fact carried out.

Why did the Egyptians place hair in a clay ball, instead of another receptacle such as a box? The association of Nile clay with fertility and rebirth is well documented, and the fact that the black earth was made into bricks used to line tombs, casements for pyramids, and for birthing-bricks, is a good example of its supposed potency. Accordingly, the placing of hair inside a clay ball may have been connected with the idea of rebirth as well. Perhaps the clay ball symbolised the lump of clay which was used to remodel the body of the deceased by the god Khnum in the afterlife. In the creation myth, Khnum is credited with having modelled gods, humans, birds and animals on his potter's wheel. The placing of hair inside the clay ball can also be connected with protection (see below). The hair physically links the clay to the deceased, adding potent sympathetic magic (totemic magic), personalising the offering. Furthermore, hair has a regenerative property; its property of growing can be observed, and hence may have been symbolically associated by the ancient Egyptians with the act of re-creation.

Scharff's examination (1929) of the work of G. Schweinfurth at Gebel el-Silsila and of J. de Morgan at Naqada has revealed early hair deposits. In a tomb-pit at the former site, which dates to Naqada II, a mass of brown human hair was found in a crudely made grey brown clay offering dish, 14 cm in diameter (Berlin 13938). At Naqada, de Morgan found a similar offering dish, 18 cm in diameter, with a roughly ball-shaped mass of curly brown human hair (Berlin 13937), which he dated to Naqada III. These are not only the earliest evidence of hair-offering found, but the earliest examples of subsidiary hair found in Egyptian graves. Along with Brunton's hair balls, they seem to be the forerunners of the clay hair balls, the clay dish seeming to have evolved into a clay ball encompassing the hair offering, holding it safely in place, whilst still allowing the combination of hair and clay to fulfil its symbolic role.

Actual balls of hair have been found in Predynastic tombs at Mostagedda by Brunton (1937).

Small round balls of human hair were found on three occasions. In 1896, in an untouched Amratan child's grave, a ball was found with the needle and forehead hook, all covered by a basket. Another was in a completely plundered grave in the same cemetery with scraps of an ivory tusk; and a pair were found loose not far away. Balls of hair do not seem to have been noticed before in connection with prehistoric burials; they must have had a magical rather than a practical use (Brunton 1937: 90).

Other hair balls have also been found in VIIIth - VIIIth Dynasty tombs and also in some tombs of the New Kingdom. These later balls seem to be connected with the application of make-up, as they have traces of cosmetics on them and are more pad-like in appearance (Lucas 1962: 31). The Predynastic hair balls however, are more likely to be associated with sympathetic magic. Bonnet (1952) suggests that the amount of hair balls found in one place could indicate an association with magical purposes.

In the vestibule of the Hathor shrine at Mirgissa, a lock of hair was found under a piece of flint, along with pots and faience beads, as votive offerings to the goddess (Pinch 1993: 45). The association of hair with Hathor is well known, but the placing of a piece of hair as an offering in the vestibule possibly meant that the offeree was not an official, and was not allowed into the inner sanctum of the shrine. This may also explain why there was no writing inscribed on this offering (with the lock of hair personalising the offering in lieu). Another, more probable, explanation, is that the hair itself was a dedication to the goddess, held in place by the piece of flint, binding that person to Hathor and perhaps incorporating Hathor's name in that of the 'child' (see below).

The ancient historians Herodotus (II 65a), and Diodorus (I 83) reported that 'the Egyptians make vows to certain gods on behalf of their children who have been delivered from an illness, in which case they shave off their hair and weigh it against silver or gold, and then give the money (value of it) to the attendants of the animals mentioned' (Diodorus). The 'money' was then used to maintain the animals that were accorded worship by offered hair. This ceremony would have the effect of physically personalising the offering, giving it more potent magic and worth. 'All the inhabitants of the cities perform their vows to the keepers (of the sacred animals) in the following manner. Having made a vow to the god to whom the animal belongs, they shave either the whole of the heads of their children, or a half, or a third of the head, and then weigh the hair in a scale against silver, and whatever the weight may be, they give (in silver) to the keeper of the animals; and she in return cuts up some fish and gives it as food to the animals. Such is the usual mode of feeding them' (Herodotus). This first shaving of the head may have been the occasion when the child first gained the sidelock (or multi-locks) of youth, at around the age of three.

Hair-offerings may also have had a role in naming ceremonies. A child's name was usually given by the mother soon after birth, and certainly no later than the age of three. This name may have referred to some desirable characteristic, e.g. *nakhti* - 'strong' for a boy or *nedjmit* - 'sweet' for a girl. Loyal subjects may have included the name of the reigning monarch, whilst those of a pious or superstitious disposition may have included the name of a god or goddess (Strouhal 1992). H. S. Smith (pers. comm.) suggests that at this naming ceremony, which took place within a temple, it was possible that a hair offering was made to whichever god was to be the patron of the child. It thus follows that Sithathoriunet, when she was named, would have had her hair offered to the goddess Hathor. As she was a princess, this naming ceremony probably happened at one of the more major shrines or temples of Hathor at Thebes, and involved the binding of

the child to the Goddess so as to invoke both the goddess' protection and to associate the child with the goddess' virtues. This ceremony may have been similar to that witnessed by Herodotus, possibly involving a dedication to the god Horus, symbolised by the falcon, or any of the other gods' animals that were kept at the sanctuary.

### **Modern ethnographic parallels**

Modern Egyptian practice involving hair-offerings has been recorded in some detail by travellers and anthropologists. The first cutting of the hair usually happens around two or three in the Beja tribes. The head is generally shaved leaving little square tufts, and the result of this first cutting is deposited with some Weli (spiritual leader) (Murray 1935: 178). Murray also describes how one infant's hair was first cut when he was two years old and was put for safe keeping in the tomb of the female saint 'Amira in Wadi Romit'. Furthermore, boys of the Ma'aza have all their hair cut off when they reach the age of three by the village *muzayyin* (tribal circumciser). The hair is then thrown away, and a few dollars change hands (Murray 1935). Among peasants, mainly in Upper Egypt, it is customary on the first shaving of a child's head to make a sacrifice, usually of a goat, at the tomb of some sheikh or saint, and to feast on the same. The pagan ancestors of these people in Arabia observed a similar custom and gave, as alms to the poor, the weight of the hair in gold or silver. This custom was practised to save the child from going to a hell-like domain (Lane 1908: 55).

These examples show that the custom of shaving the child's head for the first time at or before the age of three still persists, and also, that the first cutting is sometimes made into an offering. This is intrinsically a rite of separation from babyhood and the womb, but is also a rite of incorporation into the family group. Most families have their own hairstyle by which child members of the group are recognised (van Gennep 1960: 54).

A practice still current in some districts of Upper Egypt is that a lock of a child is vowed to God in the event that they may reach puberty. Winifred Blackman (1925, 27) observed that young *fellahin* boys shave their heads, apart from a few tufts, that are then cut off in a special ceremony. There is no special age for this act which rather seems to depend on when the family can afford it, as the expense involved can be quite considerable. The usual age, however, seems to be between two and three when the hair has grown to 4-5cm in length.

The child is taken to the tomb of a sheikh or sheikhs to whom the hair tufts are to be dedicated, or in the case of the Copts, to the church or churches named after saints to whom the tufts are to be dedicated. The tufts of hair are removed by a barber or priest. The cut-off hair is always buried outside the tomb or mosque where it has been cut off, and is put in the ground either loose or else is first enclosed in a clay ball' (Blackman 1927: 86). Half the hair may be buried outside the religious shrine and the other half may be put into clay balls and given to one or two close friends or relatives. Miss Blackman herself received one such ball made of sun-baked marl. A feast and dancing may also accompany the ceremony. Miss Blackman states that a woman who does not conceive for a long time after marriage, prays to a sheikh or saint for a boy. If her prayers are answered, she will have the boy's hair shaved, leaving only a few tufts that she will later dedicate to the sheikh or saint that she prayed to. In the Fayum province, a boy with tufts indicates an only son. The Ancient Egyptian clay balls may thus be a mnemonic so that the clay balls that were given to the parents of the child may be represented by the ones found in the tombs by way of a reminder of their child in the next world.

There was a 'hair-offering' found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, which took the form of a braided lock of hair enclosed like a mummy in its own little coffin, laid next to a statuette of Amenhotep III that was similarly encased in a coffin wrapped in linen (Desroches-Noblecourt 1989). The facts that Tiye was Amenhotep III's 'Great Royal Wife', and that the two miniature coffins were laid next to each other, together with the analysis of the hair-type involved, have led to the conclusion that the lock of hair comes from Queen Tiye. She was also the grandmother of Ankhesenamun, the wife of Tutankhamun, and by some genealogies, Tutankhamun's grandmother (Robins 1992). Thus, the placing of the lock of hair in the tomb as a keepsake, in commemoration of his paternal grandmother and grandmother-in-law, might make sense. This is a custom that is still widely practised today throughout the world, especially with the hair of children and other loved ones. The lock of hair is often encased in a locket and hung around the neck.

To cut the hair is to separate oneself from the previous world; to dedicate the hair is to bind oneself to the sacred world and more particularly to a deity or a spirit with whom kinship is in this way established. But such a dedication is only one of the ways of handling hair which has been cut off (van Gennep 1960: 166-67):

In the shorn hair ... there resides a portion of the personality ... The rite of cutting the hair or of a tonsure is also used in many different situations: a child's head is shaved to indicate that he is entering into another stage, that of life; a girl's head is shaved at the moment of marriage to indicate a change from one age group to another; widows cut their hair to break the bond created by marriage, and the rite of placing the hair in the tomb; sometimes the same purpose is achieved by cutting the hair of the deceased.

F. A. Hassan (pers. comm.) has observed women in an Upper Egyptian village putting hair clippings in crevices of buildings. A similar practice has been recorded in Tahiti, where some women have been observed placing hair in the crevices of cairns piled against a wall, cairns are considered sacred and serve to protect the cut hair from evil magic (Frazer 1922).

### **Further evidence of hair-offering**

The deliverance theory seems to be substantiated by the later Ptolemaic practice recorded in the four books of *Aetia* (causes). The poem 'The lock of Berenike,' tells of a lock of hair that was dedicated to Aphrodite (who is associated with Hathor) by the wife of Ptolemy III in gratitude for his safe return from the Third Syrian War (Bowman 1986: 225), although this custom is normally associated more with Greeks than Egyptians. Another custom more frequently associated with Greeks than Egyptians is the cutting off of locks of hair when in mourning. Plutarch states that Isis did this when she was in mourning for Osiris: 'When Isis heard of it (the murder of Osiris) she cut off there and then one of her locks and put on her mourning garment' (Plutarch 14, 356D). Isis is also said to have put on black mourning robes; this definitely was not an Egyptian custom. Isis' act may also be 'hinted at in Papyrus Ramesseum XI.' (Shaw & Nicholson 1995: 118). This Middle Kingdom papyrus tells of the legend of Hathor's lost tress, hinting at a sinister reason behind the loss of the braid (Posner 1986). Part of this legend may have been incorporated into the Isis myth. The theory that it was an original Egyptian custom

going back at least as far as the Middle Kingdom seems to be substantiated by the Middle

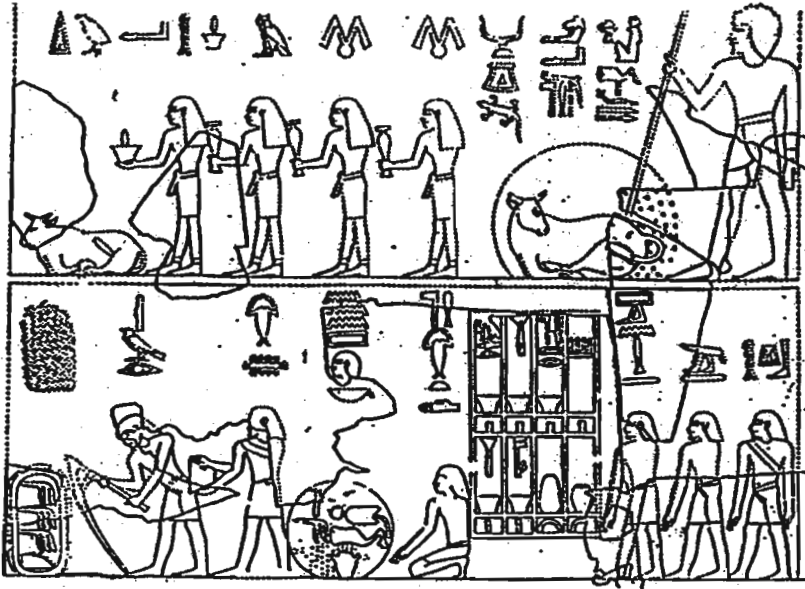


Figure 2 Burial of the 'black hair' from the tomb of Mentuherkhepeshef (after Davies 1913, pl.9)

Kingdom words for 'mourn'  $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$  *i3kb* and 'widow'  $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$  *h3rt* , both of which have the triple braid hieroglyph as a determinative, possibly denoting that locks of hair were associated (cut off?) with the period of mourning and widowhood. The Egyptian custom of wearing hair long in a dishevelled state when in mourning, does not preclude them from cutting off a lock of hair. The cutting off of hair as a mourning ritual may thus be another explanation for the Egyptian custom of placing of hair in graves. The actual practice of this ritual might have been proved had there not been a discrepancy in the reporting of finds from Tutankhamun's tomb. Hopfner (Plutarch 1940: 44) states that a small wreath of Ankhseamun's hair was found on the uraeus of Tutankhamun's coffin, citing the German edition of Carter *et al.* (1936: 199). The English edition does not appear to have this information; it notes a small wreath of flowers tied 'around the vulture and uraeus insignia' of the second coffin (Carter *et al.* 1927: 190). Howard Carter's original field notes, now held in the Griffiths Institute at Oxford University may be able to resolve this discrepancy.

Probably the most enigmatic type of hair offering is the one portrayed in the XVIIIth Dynasty tomb of Mentuherkhepeshef at Thebes. The fourth scene from the wall painting (Fig. 2) shows 'The prince coming to see the procedure practised in the Land of Kenemt'.

Shown in the lower register are two scenes: the first is a pit containing the word *tekenu* and hair, heart, fore-leg and hide (of the *tekenu*?). The human *tekenu* has been replaced by an animal sacrifice. The second scene appears to be of special importance: the burial of 'black hairs' ( $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ ) in a buttressed enclosure pit. The 'chief mason' and the 'guardian of Serqet' seem to either be digging or filling in the pit (Davies 1913: 16-17). Whether the hairs were those of the deceased or of an animal victim (bull), is not stated, but the hieroglyphics seem to indicate that they are human. The depiction

of a bull may suggest that the act depicted involves a fertility ritual invoking rebirth into the afterlife. Bonnet (1952) suggests that 'it could be a ceremony around the figure of the *tekenu*' (Bonnet 1952: 268). Alternatively, it could be a territorial rite as bulls were often sacrificed when entering new or marginal zones (van Gennep 1960: 19). The burying of the hair could be marking this transition into the Land Kenemt (the Oasis of Khargeh) and making it a more personal rite of passage as an offering to the sacred world, because in turn, the other zone(s) are sacred to the inhabitants of the adjacent territories. 'Not so long ago the passage from one country to another, from one province to another within each country, and, still earlier, even from one manorial domain to another was accompanied by various formalities' (van Gennep 1960: 15). Accordingly, this could be a depiction of a socio-political mission with Mentuherkhepeshef as the Egyptian envoy.

### Summary

From the limited evidence, there would seem to have been various reasons behind the ancient Egyptian practice of hair-offering, all of which suggest that these types of offerings involved a very personal sympathetic magic. However, the magical significance of hair in ritual offerings, mentioned by such scholars as Bonnet (1952) and Brunton (1937), and alluded to earlier in this paper, should perhaps be clarified. The word 'magic' is not to be confused with the modern meaning it has gained in connection with illusion and conjuring tricks. It must be thought of as an integral part of ancient Egyptian magico-religious thought and practice.

Hair-offerings, from the evidence, appear to be an important element of Egyptian popular religion or family magic, as opposed to the larger scale local or state religious beliefs and practices. The family-based form of religion comprised ancestor cults, deities for dealing with female problems, and many formulas to obtain cures or to ensure the occurrence of certain events or wishes.

Hair was used within ritual as an easily obtained totem (token) of the offeree. The Egyptians believed that the spiritual and physical entity of a person resided in every part of the body. Hair was thus used in a ritual as representing the offeree, as it was seen as an essential and powerful part of the living person. The hair-offering was thus instilled with the very life force of the person, acting to reinforce their will in the ritual, a power which no inanimate object could adequately contain.

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