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THE BEARD OF RAMESES VI¹

Abstract: *The beard first appeared in Egyptian iconography in the Early Dynastic period on the Narmer palette and remained a common feature thereafter. The pharaoh, as a god on earth, was a personification of perfection. Always crisp and clean-shaven, he represented both the Egyptian nation and divine power. His fake beard, which was attached with ribbons and was clearly visible on his images and reliefs, was one of the elements indicating his divine nature.*

Ordinary people also grew beards or moustaches. We can see stubble on the faces of men mostly engaged in physical work on a number of images on the walls of tombs. However, in these cases, the facial hair would not have indicated any godly qualities.

Nevertheless, some depictions of the pharaoh are similar to those of simple men in that he also possesses stubble. This is most clearly seen on a number of ostracons from Deir el-Medina. However, if the pharaoh has stubble, its significance is quite different. Very few such unshaven images are known and published and only a small number of these are official depictions. The final such image that will be considered is the one found in KV 9 belonging to Pharaoh Rameses VI.

Keywords: *Rameses VI; KV 9; iconography of the king; beard; khepresh*

The pharaoh, as a god on earth, had to embody an ideal. Always fresh and clean-shaven, he represented both the Egyptian nation and divine power.

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His false beard, which was tied on with a ribbon, is visible in many of his images and signifies his divine nature. These canonical depictions can be found on sarcophagi and the walls of tombs and temples. Due to the fact that they are official images, they are not difficult to interpret.

However, other images show the pharaoh with a completely different kind of facial hair. In these, the king has natural stubble. These are mainly encountered on a number of *ostraca* from Deir el-Medina,² but can also be found, albeit less frequently, on the walls of temples or tombs, as well as in sculpture:

1. Berlin Statuette 21836 from Tell el-Amarna (Schäfer 1934, 4, Abb. 3 and Taf. 1, 2; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 189, figs 1-3; Kaiser 1967, Abb. 746).

2. Tell el-Amarna Ostrakon (Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 190, fig. 4; Pendlebury 1932, pl. 14: 1).

3. Berlin Ostrakon 23674 (Schäfer 1934, 5, Abb. 5; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 191, fig. 5).

4. Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2568 (Vandier d'Abbadie 1937, pl. LXXII).

5. Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2569 (Vandier d'Abbadie 1937, pl. LXXIII).

6. Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2972 (Vandier d'Abbadie 1959, pl. CXLII).

7. Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2977 (Vandier d'Abbadie 1959, pl. CXLV).

8. Baltimore Ostrakon no. 32.1 (Peck 1978, 104; Mathieu 2003, 229).

9. Wall decoration of TT 341 (Rameses II) (Davies and Gardiner 1936, pl. C; Lüddekens 1943; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 193, fig. 8; Davies and Gardiner 1948, 31-41; Porter and Moss 1960, 408-409; Leblanc 2010, 276).

10. Wall decoration of Abu Simbel temple (Rameses II) (Champollion 1835, pl. XV).

11. Wall decoration of Abu Simbel temple (Rameses II) (Champollion 1835, pl. XVII).

12. Wall decoration of Abu Simbel temple (Rameses II) (Champollion 1835, pl. XXXV; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 196, fig. 12 and 197, fig. 12 bis).

² The *ostraca* from Deir el-Medina have order numbers which are listed in Vandier d'Abbadie's publications (1937; 1959), apart from Baltimore Ostrakon no. 32.1.



Fig. 1. Detail of the image of Rameses VI from Chamber F.
Reproduced from Piankoff 1954, vol. 1, frontispiece

13. Wall decoration of KV 6 (Rameses IX) (Lepsius 1853, bl. 234a; Schäfer 1934, 4, Abb. 4; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 199, fig. 13).

One more image of Rameses V/VI should be added to this list, namely the one found in the KV 9 tomb in the Valley of the Kings (Fig. 1). The scene in question is located on the southwestern wall of the pillared Chamber F³ and presents a double symmetrical representation of Osiris seated in a chapel (Piankoff 1954, vol. 2, pl. 63) with the king in front of the god figure on each side. Rameses V was initially on the right, as is evidenced

³ Piankoff (1954, vol. 1, fig. 2) names it Chamber Hall E.

by the re-inscription of the cartouches. He is worshipping Osiris, holding incense in one hand and a libation vase in the other. The king on the left is holding an incense burner in his outstretched hand, whilst a symbol of the Sed festival (related to the celebration of the pharaoh's rule) hangs from his right arm (Piankoff 1954, vol. 2, pl. 64; Hornung and Staehelin 2006, 46).

In both scenes, the king wears a *khepresh* crown (Gardiner 1953, 20, note qq, pl. II; Strauss 1980, 814-815; Davies 1982, 69-76; Leahy 1992, 223-240). At first glance, it seems that there is nothing unusual about this scene, but on closer inspection the king's face can be seen to be covered in stubble (Piankoff 1954, vol. 1, frontispiece; Piankoff 1954, vol. 2, pl. 62). The time at which stubble was added to the image is not known, but there are at least two possibilities based on the information we have available:

1. During the lifetime of Rameses V. Decoration work on the Pillared Chamber continued throughout the lifetime of Rameses V, but was interrupted by his death (Abitz 1989, 40-48). At this time, Rameses VI took control of the tomb and Rameses V was only buried in the second year of his reign (Peden 1994, 83-88; Peden 2001, 21, note 5). If the image of Rameses V was finished at this time, it is possible that the stubble represented the mourning of Rameses V for his predecessor, Rameses IV.

2. When Rameses VI took possession of the tomb. At this time, work on other rooms in KV 9 was continued and the cartouches of Rameses V were re-inscribed with the name of his successor (Peden 2001, 83-84). It is possible that the beard was painted on the image of the king at this time, which would suggest that it represented the mourning of Rameses VI for Rameses V.

Previous attempts have been made to interpret this type of image and there are therefore several theories concerning its existence. The earliest known image of this kind is wooden statuette no. 23674 from the Berlin museum (Schäfer 1934, 5; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 191), which depicts Amenhotep IV. The second such image can be found on the Tell el-Amarna *ostracon*. In this case, the stubble was not painted, but carved on the surface of the cheek instead (Pendlebury 1932, 148). The very fact that the ruler had this type of beard at all may indicate that this was the manner in which the new pharaoh could, or perhaps had to, show his grief at the death of his predecessor (Mathieu 2003, 228). Other evidence, such as the tears that can be discerned on some *ostraca* (e.g. Deir el Medinah no. 2568 [Vandier d'Abbadie 1937, 116-117, pl. LXXII], Baltimore no. 23.1 [Mathieu 2003, 229; Schuls and Seidel 2009]), could support this theory.



Fig. 2. Detail of Rameses II from the battle scene of Abu Simbel.
Reproduced from Champollion 1835, pl. XVII

One key observation is that the pharaoh's stubble only appears in combination with the *kheprsh* crown. This representation of the king is believed to have signified the initial period just after the assumption of power by the new monarch and the coronation that took place during the mourning period (Mathieu 2003, 229-230). The image of the pharaoh from tomb TT 341 in Sheikh Abd el-Gournah (Davies and Gardiner 1936, pl. C) and the figure of Rameses II in the Abu Simbel temple (Champollion 1835, pl. XV) are good examples of this scene. On the day of the funeral of his predecessor, the new king could shave off his stubble and end the mourning period.

This theory could perhaps be modified on the basis of a battle scene of Rameses II from Abu Simbel (Champollion 1835, pl. XVII), in which the pharaoh's head is adorned with a wig (Fig. 2) instead of a *kheprsh* crown. To the best of my knowledge, this scene has never been linked to the issue of the pharaoh's stubble. Another example is *ostracon*

no. 2977 found in Deir el-Medina (Vandier d'Abbadie 1959, pl. CXLV). On this preserved fragment, there is an image of the king with his head turned to the right adorned with a wig and a *uraeus*. It is difficult to unambiguously state what the circumstances leading to the pharaoh's depiction on the *ostrakon* in this manner could have been. His hand and its placement in front of the face may have indicated the religious nature of the scene, as the gods were characteristically worshipped by the raising of one hand. However, after reconstruction of the ruler's face, it is evident that the hand is placed too high in regard to the head, meaning that the forearm runs straight across the king's face (Fig. 3).

Based on only these two images, it is impossible to state categorically whether the figure on the *ostrakon* is also Rameses II, as the wig is the only element that connects them. As far as the dating of individual *ostraca* showing images of the pharaoh in mourning is concerned, the majority of them date back to the Ramesside period, examples of which are *ostrakon*



Fig. 3. Ostrakon no. 2977 of Deir el-Medina with a reconstruction of the face.
Reproduced from Vandier d'Abbadie 1959, pl. CXLV

no. 2568 from Deir el-Medina and Baltimore no. 32.1. However, there is no sound rationale according to which individual depictions may be assigned to specific rulers.⁴ When comparing the images, it is clear that *ostracon* no. 2977 (Fig. 3) and the representation from Abu Simbel (Fig. 2) are characterised by the slenderness of the king's features. The image of Rameses V/VI from KV 9 has more portly features. For the two representations to be assigned to the same king, the differences in face plasticity could only be explained if the first two images showed the king as a younger man with softer features.

Aside from the example of Abu Simbel, I have yet to come across any representation of the pharaoh in both a wig and with stubble. However, at this point it is necessary to question if the image of a pharaoh in a wig and with stubble can really be connected to the period of mourning for his predecessor, especially considering that this image appears in battle scenes (Champollion 1835, pls XV, XVII). In any case, there is no doubt that these images of the ruler merit close inspection, especially when the *khepresh* crown is also present. Two further questions must also be asked. Why does this convention appear only from the times of Akhenaten onwards and why does it occur on a wider scale in Ramesside times?

For those more familiar with the issue, my remarks about the image from the tomb of Rameses VI may seem unnecessary. However, such scenes are not very common in Egyptian iconography. In fact, as far as I know, only fourteen examples have been discovered from the entire Pharaonic period to date.⁵ The scarcity of comparative material could be the result of the fact that many images of the New Kingdom period were destroyed. It is also possible that this decorative detail was not preserved in drawings of scenes from tombs or temples, especially from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century. It could easily have been overlooked or considered to be insignificant or meaningless in the context of the entire scene. It should also be kept in mind that even published material sometimes includes elements that have previously been overlooked and therefore have not been covered by later studies. A. Piankoff himself, the author of a two-volume publication

⁴ The assignation of certain images to specific rulers has already been attempted: Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2568 – Seti I; Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2569 – Amenhotep III (Mathieu 2003, 228-230). It is perhaps possible to assign Deir el-Medina Ostrakon no. 2977 to the figure of Seti I based on the plasticity of the face. His image from Karnak was used as the basis for the reconstruction of the missing fragments of the face on the ostrakon (*The Epigraphic Survey* 1985, XVIII, pl. 20: B).

⁵ Pendlebury (1932, 148) additionally names an image of Rameses III from his tomb in the Valley of the Kings, but I myself have seen no such scene there.

on the tomb of Rameses VI, failed to mention the pharaoh's beard, which led to it being overlooked and ignored in archaeological literature for a very long period. Even more interestingly, Piankoff (1954, vol. 1, frontispiece, vol. 2, pl. 62) made the scene containing the bearded Rameses VI the frontispiece of his first volume and I myself failed to notice this detail, despite being familiar with the publication. In fact, it was only during my work on KV 9 that I had the chance to see the images up close and observe the atypical representation of the pharaoh.⁶

To be able to examine the evolution of the trend more thoroughly, it must be hoped that the database of these representations will grow. I very much hope that this 'new' example of a bearded pharaoh will allow the scope of research on the topic to be extended and for answers to be found to these troubling issues concerning the pharaoh's beard.

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⁶ This was during the Polish Epigraphical Mission in the Tomb of Ramesses VI (KV 9) carried out by Professor Adam Łukaszewicz in March, 2010 under the auspices of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw.

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