

Pillows For A King – The Headrests Of Ancient Egypt And Tomb Kv 62

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Many artifacts discovered in the tombs of ancient cultures are called exceptional finds and have rewritten history as we know it. Impressive artifacts seen in museums throughout the world may overshadow the smaller day-to-day ones. The Headrest, known mostly from the ancient Egyptians, was a simple design used to support the head during rest, sleep and death. It cannot however, be overshadowed or diminished in value when one considers it was necessary in life as well as in the all-important afterlife of ancient funerary cults.

Past research on this unusual artifact has enabled it to be called “a pillow for the head” as the headrest is discovered frequently in Egyptian burials, tombs and mastabas. It asks the question if they were used in daily life or only in a funerary context. The answer may come by delving into specific spiritual and religious aspects and the designs of ones from certain tombs, such as those recovered by Englishman Howard Carter and his discovery of tomb KV 62. The necessity to combine daily life with the all-important Egyptian afterlife is apparent. The question that comes to mind and is often asked, “were they actually used in life as well as in death”? The answer proves to be yes. Whether simple, intricate, plain or decorative, the true meaning to the ancient Egyptian and their purpose is explored in this paper.

In the early 20th century, the mysteries of a tomb deeply stirred public imagination with a lingering effect even today. The architecture and archaeology of a tomb numbered 62 in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings, situated precisely (25°44’8”N 32°36’04.8”E), was similarly dug and built as others of the same era, but smaller and lay in the main wadi of the Valley of the Kings. Discovered on November 4, 1922, the tomb consisted of steps leading to an entrance corridor, an antechamber, annex, burial chamber and treasury. The tomb held a young Pharaoh, Nebkheperura Tutankhamun, who died at age 19, reigning a few short years. Since that time, many have questioned the design, size, and uses of the 5,000+ artifacts found in that tomb. We now know that this tomb was not meant for the young Pharaoh due to the evidences of his hasty burial and most importantly, the fact that many of the

artifacts were clearly made for a woman, which includes many of the Headrests discussed in this paper.

The curiosity of the tomb has held current and is generally considered a topic that opened up public participation in Archaeology and Egyptology. Centered on the important, New Kingdom and its Eighteenth Dynasty (1,570-1,320 B.C.) we were introduced to famous historical names such as Tutankhamun, Akhenaten, Aye, Nefertiti, and Ankhesenamun. The powerful rulers of the Eighteenth Dynasty likely saw little security for their hidden tombs, having been plundered many times before their own burials. Priests had to move caches and mummies several times to new locations, causing the use of new massive nested coffins and sarcophagi. Aside from the Headrests, other unusual artifacts were discovered in KV 62. Each was meticulously catalogued and conserved *in situ* by artist and excavator, Howard Carter along with photographs by Harry Burton. To both their credit, we are able to see them today. This window into the past showed us never-before-seen golden thrones, cedar chests inlaid with silver, ivory and ebony, hunting bows, alabaster vases, stone vessels, jewelry, textiles, chariots, and three mummies.

A Headrest is made in a variety of materials, unique in shape, form and meaning and is considered strange to modern society. Discoveries of headrests in many tombs and burials would first answer the query of use with the fact that using one was considered essential to everyday life, sleeping well and most every ancient household possessed one. Naturally taken into the tomb at death, little is known of Middle Eastern and Egyptian bedroom furnishings with the exception of bedsteads and sleeping mats. Sitting and sleeping took place mostly on the floor on a reed mat or linen sheets and on a higher elevation or roof with the necessity for catching the night breeze, especially under one's neck. Simple headrests were made of perishable woods like sycamore, tamarisk or acacia, and were very simplistic in design. Materials such as earthenware, stone and ivory were also used. The early headrests appear to be a simplistic columnar style with solid block pedestals and a curved end for the head. Stone headrests were not uncommon and thought to be made solely for use in the afterlife and a tomb object only due the durability of the hard material perhaps not intended for everyday use.

Headrests were justly considered an important funerary object for the next life as we see from ancient religious texts. Texts saying, "sleep well" were not uncommonly written and the ancient Egyptian word for headrest (*wrs*) is related to the word *rs*, which means, "dream". The religious significance and the need to "raise one's head higher" became important while sleeping and even after death. For a funerary ceremony, the deceased's head would be raised or propped up on a headrest in the coffin or sarcophagus. The headrest was also known to be used in providing

protection against superstitions and dangers during the night sleep. We see images of the protective deity BES and others added to the headrest to protect the sleeper from bad dreams. Some headrests are placed close to the head of the mummy within the tomb, or either on top of the coffin, or within it to aid in the protection of the head from being severed from the body after death. The all too common threat of tomb robbers destroying the body of a mummy while looking for jewellery and gold was very real and considered a violent act. This belief is further confirmed by seeing the placement of a small metal amuletic headrest near coffins and mummy, being ritualistically symbolic and important.

Headrests were made both for men and women, which may account for the variations in height and size and design. The height of the headrest itself may not have been important, but was dependent on the length of the neck it held, male or female or child. On average most were six inches in height. Paintings from the tomb of Mena (TT 69) show a headrest along with a bed being carried into his tomb indicating the deceased would be using both in the afterlife. An Old Kingdom terracotta headrest is a clay model of a sleeping woman on her side, placing the concave part of the object just above the ear could provide some comfort. More elaborate ones are seen as far back as the Sixth Dynasty from a tomb near the pyramid of Tety in Saqqara. We know the Egyptians had textiles (linen) and feathers for pillows as well.

In the Theban tomb of Dynasty VI official, Wah, a wooden headrest contained a curious small disc shaped object made of a composite of resin, known as a *hypocephalus* pillow, undoubtedly used to cushion the head as it lay on the arc of the headrest. Showing necessity, but not comfortable without a pillow, resin and the soft padding of linen pads and cloths were at times used to make the headrest use pleasant. Pieces of rounded resin-type material have been found in several tombs, most likely for use as a headrest pillow. The *hypocephalus* pillow could have been an introduction to the common small pillow we know today.

The construction and design of a headrest was most important. A simple one begins as a basic carved alabaster, wood or stone piece, consisting of three parts. The pillow or arc, the uppermost part is where the head rests and most always is designed in the arc shape. The straight, fluted or columnar shaft supports the arc and had to be the strongest part of the construction. Resting on a rectangular base, it supports the entire structure. Sometimes the column shaft and base were inscribed or painted with the title and the name of the person whose head it held. If constructed comfort was a concern, is not something we can say or if it was even taken into consideration. One obvious advantage of using a headrest was that it allowed air circulation under the head between the shoulders and neck, important for living and sleeping in Egypt's hot climate. Sleeping on one's side could be

difficult on a headrest. The distance and height had to correspond correctly to the length of the shoulder and had to bridge the distance between the head and the surface of whatever one was lying on. Perhaps this made it more comfortable. Some Middle Kingdom mummies have been found lying on their left side with a headrest under the mummy mask.

Headrests are found in many cultures including areas of Africa from Ethiopia to Swaziland. The Japanese use headrests for consideration in the elaborately beaded and braided coiffure hairstyles of women and men. Avoiding the muss of an elaborate hairstyle, one would sleep on a headrest to preserve the coiffure. The Japanese Geisha rested their heads on curved wooden headrests for this reason, comfort being of no concern. In China, curved hard blocks of porcelain or stone materials are seen at a much lower height, making it easier for the neck to adapt just as it would on a small pillow. Chinese headrests were highly decorated with bright pictures of plants, animals and figures, as were the Egyptian ones with hieroglyphics, paintings and religious symbols.

Modern day arguments exist against the ancient use of a headrest and are based on impracticality and lack of comfort for a good night's sleep. We could substantiate this today with sleeping on one (or attempting to). Many believe this argument to be baseless and vary. Whatever opinion is taken, they were found in everyday life and in a death context in many cultures including ancient Egypt. It is interesting to note they are rarely seen or used in modern day Egypt. Whether for the necessity of "raising the head" or a strictly utilitarian one, some modern mortuaries today use a small headrest for deceased's head.

Descriptions of some of the headrests from the tomb KV62 will show the reasons and use of this artifact. One of the most photographed, unusual and published headrest found in Tutankhamun's tomb, Cairo Museum (No. JE620-20) measures H 29.1 cm; x L17.5 cm and is referred to as "Man and Lion Headrest", or "Shu". Carved in solid ivory, there appears to be a clear relation between this obviously symbolic headrest and the concept of the rising sun (the headrest being the horizon). The head of the deceased is associated with the sun and putting it on a headrest in the horizon would ensure resurrection. The assertion of raising one's head with a headrest would be completely necessary. In this one, the central column of the headrest forms the deity Shu, supporter of the heavens, and is joined in two pieces. Details of the figure show a headdress and kilt engraved and filled with a black pigment with a bluish hue. Suspended from the shoulders of the deity Shu, are protective amulets. Inscribed on the back of the figure Shu is a legend engraved in hieroglyphic script and filled in with black pigment. The base or pedestal of the headrest has two recumbent lions, each facing out, symbolical mountains of the East and West, carved "in the round" with

their manes, ribs and tail tuft engraved and filled in with black pigment. The lions represent the east and west horizons, the sun's daily course. The two pieces of the headrest are joined at the center of Shu's torso where a piece of wood is attached with gold nails. Shu is considered "the God of air" and used as a symbol of a heavenly deity. Also called Onuris, it supports the heavens, which rose up the sky. The legend tells of Shu bringing an end to chaos and his daughter Nut raised the sky by holding it up continually so it would not fall. He raised all the gods that had been created and Nut took possession making them into stars. It is an excellent interpretation of holding up one's head (as in similar spells in the Book of the Dead 166 & 55) and are interpreted as attributing the headrest to resurrection, the air necessary for life. An important and necessary funerary addition to the tomb, behind the figure of Shu is the hieroglyphic inscription: *"The good god, son of Amun, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, lord of the Two Lands, Nebkheperura [i.e. Tutankhamun], given life like Ra forever"*.

Many headrests are found of gilded wood in the Cairo Museum (JE620-24) and in plain designs and shapes, with no decorations or inscriptions. Covered with gesso and gold leaf, the headrest, found in the Antechamber of KV 62 amongst a jumbled pile in one of the glorious painted wooden chests had to be meticulously conserved. Two others, almost identical gilded headrests were found in the Annex of the tomb, but also in very poor condition not described here. Since the tomb's contents had obviously been re-arranged by robbers, the exact location of many objects is not known. It is thought, however, that this set of three gilded headrests might have been used with the three great gilded animal motif funerary beds, a necessary convenience for sleep.

The remaining headrests from this tomb described below, were all found in the Annex, although it is not believed that was their original position in the tomb, being left there by tomb robbers. They are all of the highest quality, funerary in design but so show signs of daily wear, although just who used them will remain a mystery.

A unique turquoise-blue glass headrest in the Cairo Museum (No. JE620-22) was found in a much-disintegrated condition with moisture and fungus apparent on the surface. The central column is octagonal shaped and made of two pieces of glass joined in the center by means of a square wooden dowel. Howard Carter felt it important to write to the former head of the Institute of Glass Technology at Sheffield University, Prof. W. E. S. Turner in order to attain further information. Evaluated as a glass composite, there was a fracture found in its stand and with the presence of air bubbles, a characteristic feature of ancient glass. Polishing and repair was clearly visible after careful inspection, but only on certain surfaces, which would lead one to believe it had been shaped by a mould, and then smoothed by

polishing with an abrasive. This beautiful headrest appears to be decorative showing little evidence of use.

A lapis lazuli dark blue colored faience headrest is made of glazed pottery. The joint on this piece is covered by a band of thin gold sheet. On this band is an interesting, rarely seen crosshatch pattern, filled with blue, red and lapis colors. At the center back and front are designs in turquoise blue glaze of the hieroglyphic cartouche of Tutankhamun, flanked by uraei. This is unusual and not seen in the others and appears to be made personally. We could imagine this detailed headrest made specifically for the young Pharaoh in life and shows sign of polishing and use.

A unique headrest found in the shape of a folding stool first appears as wood, but is entirely of carved ivory, and stained with red, green and black pigments. It is intricate in that the arc portion consists of three strings of seven small cubes of ivory, black and red alternating in color and attached to the ends of the pillow ending in the face of the god BES carved on the outside surface. Four folding legs end in duck heads grasping in their mouths the crossbar for supporting the weight. Egyptian ducks and geese were considered sacred by the ancient Egyptians, and appeared in much of their artwork, as did the god BES. Previously referred to as Bisu and Aha, BES was a dwarf god who was complex in meaning. He was thought to be the patron of childbirth and home as well as War, a curious combination but sometimes depicted with the young Horus to scare off evil spirits lurking around the birth chamber. For these reasons, it may be thought that this headrest could have belonged to the young Pharaoh and his wife, Ankhesenamun, for the birth of their children, the two stillborn female fetuses recently identified by DNA as his daughters.

A second glass headrest trimmed in gold with a speckled appearance is carved from a single piece of lapis colored glass has a curious history. The front is incised with the name of Tutankhamun in cartouche, filled with paste to highlight the cartouche. The edges of the curved pillow part are edged in gold. This particular headrest entered the Cairo Egyptian Museum collection in 1960 having previously been in the collection of King Farouk. It is said Howard Carter gave it to him in the 1920s, but the lack of documentation means we may never know where in the tomb it was found or its true provenance. It may have been left for a more valuable object by tomb robbers in the confusion.

The earlier mentioned tiny iron headrest is a unique interpretation of a full size headrest and its placement is totally symbolic. It is a tiny beaten iron amulet of a headrest found beneath the head of the young Pharaoh's mummy and behind his funerary mask, measuring L 4 cm x H 5.1cm.

Today, most headrests are in museums on exhibit and in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, in a cabinet on the second floor. A recent visit to the

Cairo museum allowed me special permission to study, observe and acquire photographs of these headrests, bringing a surprising realization. The headrests seen up-close in the unlit dusty cases are much smaller than imagined. This alone allows one to realize that many of the KV 62 collection were indeed made for a young person and perhaps for personal use, a young Pharaoh or child about to embark out of his teen years.

In conclusion, finding unusual artifacts and objects of unknown personal use can be overwhelming to the discoverer. More impressive artifacts in museums today overshadow the day-to-day ones such as the Headrests, and smaller artifacts, though their importance is not diminished. The mostly unknown artisans of ancient Egypt are the ones to be praised and admired for these unique creations we view today in museums. Were they not the ones who designed and created these treasures? We know of only a few of these architects, artisans, and tomb builders, but do know that each used every available resource in their natural environment to design and craft objects for life and death for the ancient Egyptian culture.

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Jasper Amuletic Headrest (H: 1” (2.5cm) MMA-Acc. # 74.51.4458
Metropolitan Museum of Art



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Jan's ongoing research includes quarry sites, New Kingdom lithics, stone tools and funerary artifacts of the ancient Egyptians and in particular KV 62. She serves on the college's Expert Faculty Board for Egyptology and is a consultant for land preservation issues, evaluating prehistoric archaeological sites. While in New York state and at Iona Island facility, she was instrumental in helping develop the Native American Rock shelter Preservation Program along with excavations of Dutchess Quarry Cave, a Paleo Native American site in New York state.