

# Symbolic Meanings of Pharaoh 's False Beard in Ancient Egypt

Hongsheng Li<sup>1</sup>, Xianqun Yi<sup>2</sup>, Manjiang Chen<sup>3</sup>

1. Student of Nanning No.2 High School, Guangxi
2. Senior engineer, Guangxi Metrology and Testing Institute
3. Artist, freelance, UK

**Keywords:** Egyptian civilization, False bear, Spiritual idea, Pyramid, Sun god, Pharaoh, Legitimacy.

**Abstract.** In ancient Egypt, the reign of pharaohs lasted for more than 3,000 years, leaving many mysteries for which people are full of praise and admiration. This paper brings forth the observation and reflection of a high school student interested in ancient Egyptian culture, whose inspiration is from the things of nature such as the Sahara Desert, the Sun, and the Moon. Based on detailed image comparison and a rigorous analysis of the religious and cultural background, the author explains the symbolic meaning of the Sahara false beard which is a realistic simulation of the sun projecting its rays in the water surface. In fact, the false beard is an important form of artistic expression in ancient Egyptian god worship culture.

## Ancient remains: Egypt's most valuable cultural and tourism wealth

In the human civilization that has existed for thousands of years, there are a lot of cultures. Today, most of these cultures have disappeared whose brilliance has to be felt by exploring mysterious remnants.

Egypt is one of the four great birthplaces of human civilization. At a very early stage, ancient Egyptian civilization was highly developed, with an eternal role in the history of humans.

Ancient Egyptian civilization geographically ranged from the First Cataract of the Nile to the Delta, spanning a period from 5,000 AD under Tasian Culture until 641 AD when it was conquered by the Arabians. Nonetheless, experts say that the time-frame of the ancient Egyptian culture means the period of pharaohs lasting more than 3,000 years.

As one of four ancient civilizations, Egypt is famous for being full of places of historic interest. A large number of ancient remains have been found in the Nile Valley, Mediterranean coast, western desert and so forth. Mysterious pyramids and the Sphinx, huge murals, and intricate hieroglyphs are the symbol of ancient Egyptian civilization. Three pyramids of Giza are located just outside of Cairo, namely Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure, built about 4500 years ago, are a miracle in the history of architecture. Luxor located on the bank of the Nile River more than 700 km south of Cairo is a popular tourist destination having rich cultural heritage and attracting hundreds of thousands of tourists from around the world every year. Egyptians often say, "It is one of the most popular attractions in Egypt and a great place to visit."

With a long history and many places of historic interest, Egypt has rich tourism resources. In fact, the government has attached importance to the development of tourism. However, today's Egypt is dominated by the Arabians who are completely culturally different from ancient Egyptians.

Many people go to Egypt for historical sites on which there is a huge amount of complex information. The tourist guide, who knows a little about it, only can tell what he or she knows. This is far from satisfactory. Even coming to these great ancient Egyptian ruins, you are still a confused outsider. To really understand it, it is necessary to study the religious history of ancient Egypt.

## **Ancient Egyptian religious worship: an important interpretation of culture**

Ancient Egypt had been culturally advanced for thousands of years. Currently however, Egypt is an Islamic country. The only common point of modern and ancient Egyptians is that they live in the same piece of land. From a cultural point of view, they are quite different from each other. To understand all aspects of ancient Egyptian society, of course, one needs to start from their faith and religion.

Ancient Egypt is one of the first places for religious worship. Religion is the most important part of ancient Egypt throughout its history. Ancient Egyptian architecture in the art symbol, space settings and functional arrangements, has a profound cultural imprint and strong religious meaning, reflecting unique humanist traditions and singular spiritual ideas from ancient Egyptians.

The religion of ancient Egypt is a belief in many gods, namely, polytheism. These gods reach a large number of more than 2,000. Ancient Egyptians believed that there were gods in everything, such as earth, air, river, sky, sun, moon, animals, and plants, and that these gods were physical, for example, taking the form of animals or having a human body and an animal head. Ancient Egyptians believed that human beings could not go beyond the power and energy of nature, thereby regarding the power of nature as a god, fearing and worshipping it for the sake of being safe and well.

With the passage of time, the civilization broke up, leading to gradual changes in ideas from people. Modern people can not really understand the connotation of the religious worship among ancient Egyptians. This is a common phenomenon in all ancient cultures, that is, modern people can not really understand the culture handed down from ancient Egypt.

The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire led to an end of belief in Re (Sun God), whose influence quickly disappeared. Even among Egyptian priests, the study of the god had become a purely academic interest.

As the legend goes, ancient Egyptians worshiped the sun with the pharaoh regarded as the incarnation of the sun, and believed that people died like the sun going down in the west. Thus, generations of pharaohs built their tomb - the pyramid in the west bank of the Nile. The Great Pyramid of Egypt - the Pyramid of Khufu - is one of the seven wonders of the world, showing that ancient Egyptians' worship of the god had reached its peak. Even after death, ancient Egyptians were without ceasing to pray to the god. This shows their strong pursuit of being eternally stable and peaceful in mind.

Ancient Egyptians believed that, after a pharaoh's death, his soul rose in the sun boat from the east bank of the Nile every morning, accepting the worship from the temple; and returned to the tomb in the west bank for a rest in the evening. So, the pharaoh had an eternal life. Ancient Egyptians also believed that: people in the world lived only short lives, and the future was eternal; the door leading to the eternal future was death; the flesh was the most fundamental guarantee for the soul going to the future.

Ancient Egyptian civilization was not just embodied in the pyramids, the Sphinx and so forth, but also in cultural spirit and atmosphere. Each pharaoh in ancient Egypt was an architectural master himself, all his life studying architecture and decorative arts-related things. Therefore, each piece of ancient Egyptian architecture, painting or decoration is a piece of works of art.

Ancient Egypt preserved the remnants of primitive society for a long time. The mythology and religious belief of Egypt dominated the formation and development of the sculpture. The main feature of the ancient Egyptian art was "constancy" through which it was expected to be the medium between man and God. The art is created by people, but does not fully show their reality. This art is undoubtedly with the nature of the monument as well as a different kind of connotation meaning.

## **History of worshipping the sun god among ancient Egyptians**

Almost every mythical system of civilization has its own sun god. Ancient Egyptians gave the sun a strong religious color. There were several sun gods among which Re and Amun enjoyed the largest popularity. Re was the most famous sun god and possessed absolute authority during the Middle and New kingdoms.

During the Old Kingdom, pharaohs worshiped eagle god Horus as a guardian angel. The sun god gave a pharaoh the Eye of Horus so as to let him rule the world. In the Fourth Dynasty, Heliopolis (city of the sun in Greek) rose to prominence rapidly. Every pharaoh declared himself as the son of Re (then time as a local god in ancient Egypt). Later, around 2000 BC, a Thebes prince succeeded to the throne. At the same time, Amun became a state god and conceived as a combination of air and light; and finally fused with Re as God Amun-Re having the highest status. In ancient Egypt, the heaven was dominated by the sun god. Logically, Amun was identified with Re or proudly called the king of the gods.

There is a symbol in the ancient Egyptian text: namely, a circle plus a point in the middle of this circle. This symbol represents the sun god in hieroglyphics. In names of some pharaohs, there is a rhetoric: a goose + a sun (SaRe), which means the son of the sun god. The Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was the descendant of the sun god, a symbol of power and nobility.

Moreover, Re was considered the king of gods and the first generation of king in ancient Egypt. Therefore, there is a term Son of Re (like the emperor among Chinese) in badges of pharaohs. After the Fifth Dynasty, all the pharaohs took Son of Re as their title.

The local cult of Re began to grow from roughly the Second Dynasty, with the position as the sun god established. By the Fourth Dynasty, the pharaohs were seen as Re's manifestations on earth, referred as Sons of Re. His worship increased massively in the Fifth Dynasty, when Re became a state god and pharaohs specially aligned pyramids, obelisks and solar temples built in his honor. The rulers of the Fifth Dynasty told their followers that they were sons of Re himself and the wife of the high priest of Heliopolis. The pharaohs spent a lot of money on sun temples. The first Pyramid Texts began to arise, giving Re more and more significance in the journey of the pharaoh through the netherworld.

At the same time, the form of the pyramid stands for the worship of the sun god. Sun god Re emits rays of sunlight through the blue sky. When standing on the way to Jizah and looking to the west from a point of view on the ridge line of the pyramid, you can see the pyramid like rays of sunlight scattered to the earth.

There are some words in Pyramid Texts, which read as follows, "Spacious is Teti's seat with Geb, high is Teti's star with Re, Teti roams the Fields of Offering, Teti is that Eye of Re, conceived at night, born every day!" Later, homage of obelisk in ancient Egyptians has such significance, because the obelisk also stands for rays of sunlight.

In his book "The Pyramids of Egypt", the British scholar I. E. S. Edwards (1986) proposed another explanation. He believed that the construction of the pyramids was related to the religious worship in ancient Egypt, because the ancient Egyptians believed that after death the soul would ascend to the heaven, and the steps of the pyramid are a ladder for the soul of the king to the heaven. The large wooden boat found in the ground next to the Khufu Pyramid in 1954 is used to raise the king's soul to the heaven. Also, the pyramid symbolizes the worship of the sun god, because four ridges in it are like rays of sunlight.

## **Political and religious power with Egyptian pharaohs**

In the ancient Egyptian civilization, I am afraid that the religious belief is full of interest and confusion. The belief in god has the most important position in ancient Egypt. The king self-claimed to be the son of the sun god, so being regarded as a sacrosanct object. Later, the ancient

Egyptian king was called pharaoh, like the ancient Chinese emperor being called Your Majesty. The original meaning of pharaoh in ancient Egypt is a palace. The pharaohs not only lived to rule the world, but also fantasized about becoming a god after death to dominate the netherworld.

The belief of state gods was formed in Egypt because of generous donations from pharaohs, royal relatives and other wealthy people. The pharaoh injected himself into the basis for the worship of the sun god, calling himself the son of the sun god. Therefore, the worship of the sun god was tightly bound to efforts from the pharaoh. One of the most famous efforts was the construction of pyramids.

Pyramids are closely linked with the sun god. Each side of the pyramid is polished very smooth. The Great Pyramid, namely, the pyramid of the Khufu, has a huge limestone surface that is cut very fine, and even the blades cannot not be inserted between the stones. In this way, the pyramid can reflect sunlight to the greatest extent. The pyramid spire is all day under the sunshine. Pyramid structure indicates the supremacy of power with the pharaoh who is represented by the spire. It is self-evident that the pharaoh is the son of the sun god and the pharaoh's power comes from the sun god. From some of the existing reliefs, we can see that the pharaoh is associated with the god from the beginning and he has the supernatural will and energy from the god, and is protected by the god. The pharaoh is the son of the sun god, and on behalf of the sun god, rules the world. In short, as the inscription of the tomb for one provincial governor reads: "Pharaoh possesses a power from the god and rules the world."

From a religious point of view, the pharaoh was the embodiment of the sun god and the Nile God, was the largest priest, being responsible for leading the citizens to worship the god and presiding over the ritual so as to pray for good weather and abundant harvests. They believed the ritual ensured a good relationship between the Nile and fertile land. The pharaoh led priests at all levels with the absolute power over the appointment of them, while the priests were the pillars of the pharaoh's authority and the secret police of the social order. The priests exaggerated the authority of the pharaoh, and carried out propaganda and persuasion. Moreover, priests at all levels must be proficient in a variety of religious rituals and magic tricks, including astrology, reading religious literature, playing music, singing, explaining dreams and so forth.

The pyramid is a symbol of ancient Egyptian civilization and a crystallization of the wisdom of ancient Egyptians. But the construction of pyramids increased the burden of citizens, consumed human and financial resources, exacerbated the domestic class contradictions, and weakened the monarchy's strength. According to both Herodotus and Theodora, citizens were angry at their construction, even the uprising erupted. The Fifth Dynasty was probably setup after an uprising. Therefore, it is no wonder that the new dynasty relied more on divine power to maintain its rule.

As a slavery autocratic ruler, the pharaoh possessed military, judicial, and religious power, with his will embodied in the law. The pharaoh self-claimed as the son of sun god Amun-Re and was the agent and incarnation of the god in the earth, thereby being worshipped by his subjects. This kind of worship was quite crazy: pharaoh's name having an irresistible magic power, and officials being proud of kissing the pharaoh's feet.

Being the incarnation of the god, the pharaoh not only had the highest administrative power, but also was the highest priest and the object of worship. With different identities, the pharaoh usually chose a different title (title of king), in order to show his lofty status.

For example, Hatshepsut, the unique female pharaoh of the Ancient Egypt, before mounting the throne came together with the priests to fabricate a story of her life. It is said that she was the daughter of sun god Amun embodied as Thutmose I and his royal wife; and was expected to rule Egypt. It is said that this woman had experienced hardship and was now qualified as a pharaoh of Egypt. She placed a number of golden plates on the top of the monument at the temple to reflect the sun's rays, in order to prove to the world her intimate relationship with the sun god. Then, she began to disguise as a male and ordered everyone to use masculine pronouns when referring to her. After realizing her dream to be the first female pharaoh (also unique in the period of the Ancient Egypt), she diligently ruled the country enabling it to continuously flourish. In order to reward the priests, she raised and renovated many buildings and temples, presented to the temple four obelisks up to 30

meters in height, wrote and recited verses on the sun god.

Thanks to translators of the ancient Egyptian language, we have been able to read the inscription on the obelisk after more than 3,400 years: "She made as her monument for her father Amun, the Lord of Thrones-of-the-Two-Lands, presiding over Ipet-sut, the making for him of two great obelisks of hard granite of the South, their upper side being of electrum, of the best of all foreign lands. Seen on both sides of the river, their rays flood the Two Lands when Aten dawns between them, as he rises in heaven's light land."

"Amun, Lord of the Two Thrones-of-the-Two-Lands; He made me rule Black Land and Red Land as reward. No one rebels against me in all lands. All foreign lands are my subjects, he placed my border at the limits of heaven. What Aten encircles labors for me. He gave it to him who came from him. Knowing I would rule it for him. I am his daughter in very truth, who serves him, who knows what he ordains. My reward from my father is life-stability-rule, on the Horus throne of all the living, eternally like Re."

To sum up, the pharaoh was both a historical figure and a mythological role. The government was theocratic. In order to ensure the legitimacy, authority and permanence of the rule, the pharaohs called themselves sons of the sun god and resorted to various means to prove their relationship with the sun god and prove their divinity, so telling his people that the right of the pharaoh to rule his people is a right granted by the god. In fact, many pharaohs believed they were representatives of Re or Amun to rule people.

### The pharaoh's false beard

From the hair stylist and barber of murals, it can be seen that the ancient Egyptians were very concerned about their facial hair and body hair. Males were allowed to stop arranging or dressing their beard only during the mourning period. In order to make himself holy, the male priest would remove all the body hair, including the eyebrows and eyelashes. The Egyptians of the upper class often wore fragrant wigs and false beards made of human hair, and even inhabitants of the lower classes might decorate themselves with wigs made of plant fibers and the like.



In ancient Egypt, female ornaments had religious and cultural meanings. Being richly thematic ornaments for various purposes, they were often with symbolic meanings of religion, power, and life: for example, praying for blessings from the god, preventing disaster risks or eliminating evil spirits.

Ancient Egyptian art style is composed of a very strict rule. Each artist must start from a very young age to learn. Both hands must be placed on the knees in the sitting statue; the skin of the male must be painted darker than the female. There are strict rules for the appearance of every Egyptian god: sun god Horus must be represented as an eagle or having a hawk; death god Anubis

must be expressed as a jackal or having a jackal head.

The purpose of this paper taking a lot of space for quoting literature and legends is to express that the ancient Egyptian pharaoh strove to emphasize their relationship with the sun god in order to prove the legitimacy of monarchical divine right and consolidate their right to dominate. So, in this context, is there any reason for us to believe that the rigid and prominent false beard on the pharaoh's chin is just as a simple decoration for aesthetic effect?



After comparing a series of pictures (see below), we come up with a bold interpretation: The false beard is the projection of sunlight in the water! We can see from pictures that the pharaoh's face which wears a false beard is really like the sun rising from the Nile! This can explain why the false beard has horizontal stripes or slightly oblique ones, rather than vertical stripes naturally drooping. As we know, there are horizontal stripes in the projection of the sun in water having ripples. This can explain why the false beard is irregular in length, it is because the projection of the sun rising at the beginning is short, while long at other time. Moreover, the false beard seems to have an irrational design: the top (near the root of the chin) is narrow in width, and the bottom (hanging in front of the chest) broad. And this exactly is a realistic imitation of the sunlight reflected in water!

The statue is an extremely important form of artistic expression. With his round and full face embellished with a horizontal stripe-shaped false bear, the pharaoh succeeded in shaping himself into a sun or sun god image of the Nile, in order to win more sincere worshipers. In this, the way of thinking is exactly the same as that for ancient Egyptians inventing hieroglyphs, which is derived from an amazing imagination.

We are convinced that clever people in ancient Egypt would not spend much effort on doing such a simple thing without profound meanings. The above interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the pharaoh's false beard can give us a more thorough understanding on the sun-god worship culture of ancient Egypt.

If this theory is confirmed and promoted, it will bring a new inspiration for today's tourism culture in Egypt. We believe that there are many people around the world who are fascinated by the ancient Egyptian culture and that they are attracted by the pharaoh's false beard. Like us, they think that there is a lack of convincing evidence on the explanation that the false beard is just a decoration. We have every reason to believe that the pharaoh wearing a false beard with long horizontal stripes just to make himself look more like a real sun shining on the Nile!

## Other mysteries of ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt as one of four major civilizations in the world was a hot land where ancient clever and diligent Egyptians lived and multiplied. In the worldly life, while suffering from the war, plunder, impoverishment, sorrow, pain and the like, they pursued eternal happiness after death and silently created a brilliant civilization.

However, these amazing remains of ancient civilization had slept for 1500 years in the Sahara desert and the flood of the Nile. In 1822, French genius linguist Champollion submitted a research paper to a French institute of pure literature and inscriptions and announced the interpretation of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, so unveiling the mysteries shrouded in the ancient Egyptian civilization. This makes us to see the charm of the smile from it, also marks an extremely important chapter in the archaeological history in the world - the birth of modern Egyptian studies.

In the eighteenth century, a term of ancient Egyptian civilization emerged. In the nineteenth century, the westerners still believed that the oldest history was the history of ancient Hebrew, which was recorded in the Bible. The history of ancient Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia and Persia is occasionally narrated in Old Testament and kept to some extent in Greek works. However, even added together, these historical data are fragmentary pieces of information.

Some people think that the Egyptology was established at the end of the eighteenth century when Napoleon led an expedition to Egypt. This is the origin of the so-called modern Egyptology. But there are different views. Some scholars say that Egyptian hieroglyphs had been used for 3400 years and that these hieroglyphs gradually formed from 3500 BC and had been used until the 2nd century AD.



Where are hieroglyphs from? How did they evolve? Maybe we still can not find any clues to their origin and the fact that they had little improvement in 3,400 years. Are there other languages which remained unchanged over 3,000 years? As we know, ancient Chinese is different from modern Chinese, and so is English in Shakespeare's era from today's English. Therefore, it can be said that hieroglyphs keeping unchangeable for over 3,000 years are really a big miracle.

In the first century AD, Coptic people gradually occupied Egypt with the hieroglyphs being gradually superseded by Greek-like Coptic alphabets (initially as a supplement). According to records, in the fourth century AD, the Roman Emperor who was converted to Christianity ordered a closure of all the non-Christian temples. Afterwards, the priests who could read the ancient Egyptian text disappeared, hieroglyphics became a dead language, and no body understood them. Until the nineteenth century AD, genius linguist Champollion translated the ancient Egyptian text in Rosetta stone by comparing the Greek words, which could be readily translated.

There are plenty of equally contested theories in Egyptology, and a reading of relevant hieroglyphs is also disputed. We have good reason to believe that there must still be many secrets in the ancient Egyptian civilization, which are hidden in the long river of history. But as long as we are good at thinking and associating, perhaps we can make some discoveries from the history. It is a surprise that this paper draws such a conclusion, isn't it?

## References

- [1]. I. A S. Edwards. The Pyramids of Egypt, 1986.
- [2]. Wen Jing. Gifts of the Nile River, ISBN 9787100084635, Pages 182, Commercial Press.
- [3]. David, Rosalie. Religion and in ancient Egypt. Penguin Books, 2002.
- [4]. Manley, Bill (ed.). The Seventy Great Mysteries of Ancient Egypt. Thames & Hudson.
- [5]. Mertz, Barbara. Temples, Tombs magic and Hieroglyphs: A popular History of Ancient Egypt. Bedrick, 1990.
- [6]. Thomson, Jason (2015). Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology: 1: From Antiquity to 1881. I.B. Tauris.
- [7]. Wendy Christensen. Empire of Ancient Egypt (Chinese version), The Commercial Press, 2015.
- [8]. Meyerson, Daniel (2005). The Linguist and the Emperor: Napoleon and Champollion's Quest to Decipher the Rosetta Stone. Random House, Trade.