

Society Studies

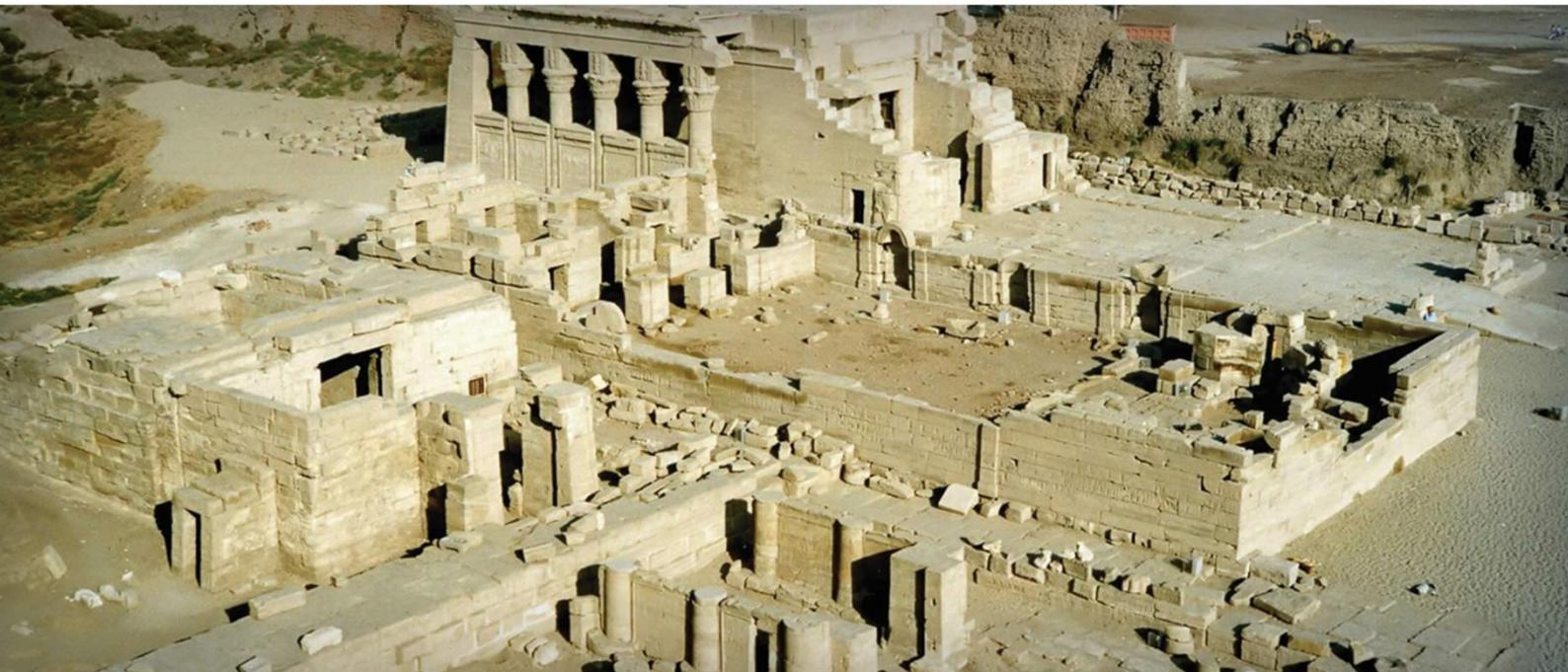
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The Secrets behind Breaking Noses of Egyptian Statues!

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The Secrets behind Breaking Noses of Egyptian Statues!

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Visitors of Egyptian antiquities often notice that there are deformities in many statues and sculptures, which arouses questions in their minds about the causes of these deformities, when they occurred, and who was behind this?

Recently, visitors of the Brooklyn Museum's Egyptian art galleries, New York, asked the museum curator Egyptologist Edward Bleiberg why the noses of Egyptian statues were broken. To provide answers to these questions, Mr. Bleiberg prepared an interesting study concluding that the noses of Egyptian statues were intentionally and deliberately broken.

Despite the importance of Bleiberg's paper, however its findings cannot be generalized, given its narrow temporal and spatial scope, as it did not include antiquities related to other civilizations along with the Egyptian monuments. In fact, Bleiberg's paper was limited to studying some Egyptian statues displayed in three museums located in the United States, namely: the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Besides the Pharaonic statues addressed by Bleiberg in his study, this paper addresses other Egyptian statues dating back to the Pharaonic era as well as the Ptolemaic and Roman eras and other statues belonging to ancient civilizations other than the ancient Egyptian civilization, such as the civilizations of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Greece and others, displayed in several museums, including the British Museum in London, the Louvre Museum in France, the Boston Museum in the United States, the Tahrir Museum in Egypt and other museums in Baghdad, Damascus, and Aden.

First: the reasons that Bleiberg stated

Bleiberg examined a number of Egyptian statues in the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan and Cleveland Museum of Art, concluding that "The consistency of the patterns where damage is found in sculpture suggests that it's purposeful," as Bleiberg said, citing myriad political, religious, personal, and criminal motivations for acts of vandalism, as follows:

1- Political reasons: represented in the rivalries between a number of rulers and kings in Ancient Egypt and their struggle over the throne, which led them to distort the artifacts of their predecessors.

2- Criminal reasons: most of which were during the Pharaonic era itself, where ancient graves were exposed to thefts by thieves who deliberately distorted them, believing that deformation of statues prevents these statues from seeing or feeling them.

3- Religious reasons: where Bleiberg identified them with both the Christian and Islamic religions. He said both the Christians and Muslims distorted and destroyed ancient statues when they entered Egypt, considering them as a pagan tradition and they are worshiped other than God.

- I agree with Bleiberg that there were political reasons behind the deformities that afflicted some ancient statues, given that some rulers in ancient Egypt used to remove the history of the powerful kings that had preceded them, and sought to rewrite history so that it would be commensurate with their personal visions, most notably what happened between Queen Hatshepsut (1479-1458 BC) and King Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC). Hatshepsut was one of the most powerful rulers of ancient Egypt; therefore, when her brother succeeded her, he tried to remove everything related to her and ordered distortion of her images and statues. "Hatshepsut's reign presented a problem for the legitimacy of Thutmose III's successor, and Thutmose solved this problem by virtually eliminating all imagistic and inscribed memory of Hatshepsut," Bleiberg wrote.

In addition, the political reasons for distorting the antiquities and breaking the noses of ancient Egyptian statues were not only related to the internal rivalries between the kings and their struggle on power but were also the result of the foreign occupation to which Egypt was subjected throughout its history. When the Roman occupation of Egypt came in 32 BC, Roman tourists, diplomats, ambassadors, and military personnel flocked to Egypt seeking culture, entertainment and transferring Pharaonic artifacts by all means, which led to breaking and deforming many statues. This happened to the Egyptian artifacts in all the different occupation eras that Egypt was subjected to.

- I also agree with Bleiberg that there were criminal motivations behind breaking the noses of Egyptian statues, where thieves sought to steal and deform antiquities, especially cemeteries. The ancient Egyptians were keen to preserve their graves and keep them in good condition because of their belief in the eternal life after death. Therefore, they worked to secure their graves and prevent robbers

from reaching and tampering with them. However, robbers managed to access many of these graves and loot them, especially during the early years of the twentieth dynasty, when the mummies of many kings and priests in Luxor's western mainland were largely plundered, despite the measures that the ancient Egyptians used to take to safeguard their sculptures. Statues were placed in niches in tombs or temples to protect them on three sides. They would be secured behind a wall, their eyes lined up with two holes, before which a priest would make his offering. "They did what they could," Bleiberg said. "It really didn't work that well."

In addition, there is a pharaonic papyrus dating back to the reign of King Ramses IX (1129-1111 BC), telling us about the first incident of looting Egyptian antiquities took place in Thebes (currently Luxor), the capital of Egypt at the time. Also, Howard Carter, who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun (1334-1325 BC) in 1922 AD, said that he noticed that a theft had taken place in the cemetery although it had not been opened since the Pharaonic era.

In order for robbers to steal those graves, they distorted the statues in the cemetery. Intentionally damaged mummies from the prehistoric period speak to a "very basic cultural belief that damaging the image damages the person represented," Bleiberg said. "The damaged part of the body is no longer able to do its job," Bleiberg explained. Without a nose, the statue-spirit ceases to breathe, so that the vandal is effectively "killing" it. To hammer the ears off a statue of a god would make it unable to hear a prayer. In statues intended to show human beings making offerings to gods, the left arm -- most commonly used to make offerings -- is cut off so the statue's function can't be performed (the right hand is often found axed in statues receiving offerings).

- Bleiberg says: "The understanding of these statues changed over time as cultural mores shifted. In the early Christian period in Egypt, between the 1st and 3rd centuries C.E., the indigenous gods inhabiting the sculptures were feared as pagan demons; to dismantle paganism, its ritual tools—especially statues making offerings—were attacked. After the Muslim 'invasion' in the 7th century, scholars surmise, Egyptians had lost any fear of these ancient ritual objects. During this time, stone statues were regularly trimmed into rectangles and used as building blocks in construction projects."

Bleiberg claims that Christianity and Islam had some kind of negative effect on ancient statues; however, I completely disagree with him, given that those distortions started in the Pharaonic era itself. One of the most prominent examples of this is the destruction and vandalism that affected the

monuments of King Akhenaten (1390-1349 BC) in the city of Tel el-Amarna, in Minya, Upper Egypt, as a reaction from the priests of Amun, the god of the sun and air in ancient Egypt, and his followers against Akhenaten, the Egyptian pharaoh that ruled during the 18th Dynasty, when he called for worship of Aten, another deity, ignoring other deities that he called for avoiding them all. As soon as the era of Akhenaten was over, all artifacts related to him suffered from deformation and destruction. Likewise, King Smakhenkhar (1335- 1334 BC) and King Tutankhamun (1333–23 BC) suffered the same fate at the hands of King Horemheb (1353- 1321 BC). However, we have also found intact statues of Akhenaten that were not exposed to distortion or breaking their noses.

"In the early Christian period in Egypt, between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, the indigenous gods inhabiting the sculptures were feared as pagan demons; to dismantle paganism, its ritual tools -- especially statues making offerings -- were attacked," Bleiberg said. In fact, what he said on distortions of pharaonic statues at the hands of followers of Christianity, based on considering them as manifestations of paganism that should be avoided, is not at all correct. Also, what Bleiberg claimed about followers of Islam groundless. After the advent of Muslims to Egypt in the 7th century, "Egyptians had lost any fear of these ancient ritual objects. During this time, stone statues were regularly trimmed into rectangles and used as building blocks in construction projects," Bleiberg said.

However, although the three revealed religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) ban worshipping anything other than God, be it human, animal or stone, the shining truth is that neither Christianity nor Islam considered these statues 'gods' as long as they have not been worshipped. Therefore, given that the Egyptians did not worship these statues, both Christianity and Islam are unlikely to be the reason behind deforming ancient statues. However, it is not excluded that some cases of deformation and sabotage that affected these statues were committed by some followers of these two religions on the pretext of carrying out a sacred religious duty.

Even if these distortions came through some Christian or Muslim rulers during these reigns, I still see that their actions were individual incidents not a general trend, even if some rulers or officials sometimes did so on the pretext of protecting religion, as the Roman Emperor Justinian (527-565 AD) did in the sixth century AD, when he closed the Temple of Isis in Feyalah and moved its statues to Constantinople on the pretext of supporting the Christians of Egypt, which helped distort and destroy

some of them. During his reign, most of the pharaonic monuments were destroyed and vandalized, and even their stones were used in construction works.

If it were a requirement of these two religions, its followers would have destroyed all these statues, and they would not be satisfied with the slight distortion associated with only parts of them. Also, if it were a religious matter, they would have removed these three-dimensional sculptures engraved on the walls of Egyptian temples!

Second: reasons behind breaking noses of Egyptian statues

After discussion of the reasons that Bleiberg provided as a justification for his paper's findings that the noses of Egyptian statues were intentionally broken, I disagree with him for the following reasons:

1- The findings of Bleiberg's paper cannot be generalized because the study was restricted to a narrow spatial range, addressing the Egyptian statues in only three museums: the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Cleveland Museum in the United States (Figures 1-3). Also, the study did not compare the Egyptian statues in these three museums with statues of other civilizations, whether Egyptian or non-Egyptian, whether in these three museums or in other museums such as the British Museum, the Louvre Museum, the Egyptian Tahrir Museum and others, as we have done in this paper.



Figure 1

Face of King Senwosret III, ca. 1878–1840 B.C. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. US



Figure 2

Statue of Amenemhat III, c. 1859–1814 C.C. Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art, US



Figure 3

Statue of King Amunhotep II (1428-1401 BC) Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, US

2- Also, Bleiberg's study focused on the deformities of only the noses of statues, ignoring other distortions that other parts of statues were exposed to, whether in ancient Egyptian statues or others, inside or outside Egypt. Taking into account that the nose is a weak part in the statue that is more vulnerable than other parts of the statue, however, there were many Egyptian and non-Egyptian statues with a broken nose, arm, or foot as in the following figures: (Figures 4-7)



Figure 4

*Egyptian bronze statue of the 25th century (Kushite)
Its hands are broken while its nose is intact - The Metropolitan Museum, USA*



Figure 5

Statue of King Bismatik II (589-595 BC) - broken hands while nose is intact
- British Museum, London



Figure 6

A limestone statue of a 17th-century Syrian ruler without a head - Cleveland Museum of Art



Figure 7

Statue of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC), broken nose and hands -
Displayed in 2016 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, US

3- Undoubtedly, the erosion processes and natural disasters that Egypt was exposed to throughout its history were behind the destruction of many ancient buildings and sculptures. Also, there are many temples, obelisks, and of course statues, that have been destroyed and deformed throughout history, mostly because of erosion processes, such as what happened to the Dandara Temple and the San al-Hajar area in Sharqia (Figures 8-9):



Figure 8

Dandara Temple, dating back to King Pepy I (2402 - 2377 BC) - parts of it have been largely destroyed



Figure 9

Destroyed Egyptian obelisks in San Al-Hajar, Sharqia, dating back to the 21st Dynasty (1070-945 BC) before transferring them to the Administrative Capital Museum

4- Among the most important points of disagreement with Bleiberg's conclusion is that the breaking of the noses of ancient statues was not limited to the Pharaonic statues only; as other statues with broken noses dating back to the Ptolemaic and Roman eras in Egypt were also found (figures 10-13).



Figure 10

Head of a statue of a Ptolemaic queen (323-31 BC) with deformed nose - Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria

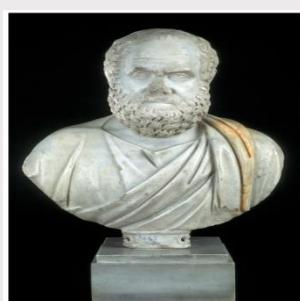


Figure 11

Bust of Greek philosopher Socrates with deformed nose - dating back to the Roman era (31 BC - 395 AD)
Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria

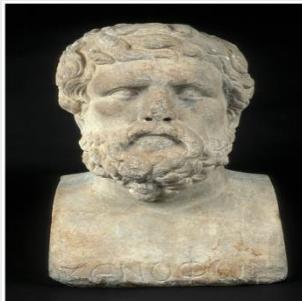


Figure 12

Bust of Greek philosopher Xenophon with deformed nose dating back to the Greek and Roman eras (323 BC - 395 AD) Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria



Figure 13

Stone head of the Roman Emperor Nero (54-68 AD) with deformed nose - British Museum, London



Figure 14

A statue of Iraqi King Sargon I (2334-2279 BC), founder of the Akkadian dynasty in Mesopotamia and Anatolia. The statue is broken and deformed - The National Museum of Baghdad



Figure 15

Statue of Assyrian King Shalmaneser III (824 - 858 BC) with a broken nose National Museum of Baghdad



Figure 16

Statue of a Greek young man (750 BC), with deformed nose - Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece



Figure 17

Greek statue of Lady Uxira (650-625 BC), with broken, deformed nose - Louvre Museum, Paris



Figure 18

Fragment of a Syrian statue of the priest Yali Bin Yalbauda (120 BC), with a broken nose - Damascus, Syria



Figure 19

Head of a Yemeni statue dating back to BC eras with deformed nose - Aden, Yemen



Figure 20

Head of a Yemeni statue dating back to BC eras with deformed nose - Aden, Yemen

6- What supports our argument is that we have found that there are intact Egyptian statues of kings and queens, both inside and outside Egypt, that were not exposed to deformation, such as statues for Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Hatshepsut (Figures 22-24). Also, there are other statues whose noses were not broken in the Brooklyn Museum itself, like the statue of Pepy II against whom the first social revolution in history (Figure 21).



Figure 21

A composite alabaster statue of Queen Ankhnes-meryre II and Her Son, Pepy II (2278-2184 BC) the Brooklyn Museum in the United States



Figure 22

Bust of Queen Hatshepsut (1479--1458 BC) with intact nose and face - The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 23

Statue of King Akhenaten (1353--1336 BC), with intact nose and face - Egyptian Museum in Cairo



Figure 24

The head of Queen Nefertiti (1370-1338 BC) with intact nose and face - Berlin Museum, Germany

7- Also, those deformed sculptures and statues are much fewer than the number of intact statues discovered so far, including statues made of stone and even of wood and others, such as Egyptian statues in museums in Germany, Britain and the United States (Figures 25-27).



Figure 25

Egyptian statue of the seated granite writer with intact nose - Berlin Museum, Germany



Figure 26

Egyptian wood statue of a maid with intact nose - British Museum, London



Figure 27

Statue of the goddess Hathor with intact nose - Boston Museum of Fine Arts, USA

8- Sometimes, the type of stone used in carving or engraving statues was behind damaging these statues and sculptures; a statue made of sandstone or limestone, for example, will certainly be less resistant than a statue made of basalt and granite; therefore, most deformations occurred to sculptures of either limestone or sandstone.

9- Many of these statues and sculptures were subjected to deformation and fracture during the process of excavation, which means that breaking of their noses as well as other parts were done unintentionally, especially if this happened during illegal excavation by some citizens, or those that were found by chance.

10- Although the incident of breaking the nose of the most famous Egyptian statue, namely, the Sphinx, was attributed to the British and German armies during the First and Second World Wars, the Napoleon's army during the French campaign in Egypt, and also others, however, all these accounts are flimsy, especially that there are drawings of the Sphinx dating back to 1737 AD, by European explorer Frederick Lewis, that show the statue with a broken nose.

In conclusion, this paper disagrees with Edward Bleiberg's findings that the noses of Egyptian statues were intentionally and deliberately broken.

Reviewing a number of Egyptian and non-Egyptian statues in a number of local, Arab, European and American museums, has proved that the noses of Egyptian statues were not intentionally broken, especially that this phenomenon was not related to Egyptian statues only, but was found in statues belonging to other civilizations, and that parts other than the noses of these statues were found broken or deformed.