In Ancient Egypt, Severed Hands Were Spoils of War

Archaeologists offer a new explanation for one of the century's grislier finds, "a carefully gathered collection of hands" in a 3,500-year-old temple.

By Franz Lidz **The New York Times** May 16, 2023

Preserved, colored hands recovered from present-day Tell el-Dab'a, Egypt, discovered in 2011. They were likely buried during Egypt's 15th dynasty, from 1640 B.C. to 1530 B.C. Credit...Julia Gresky

Aristotle called the hand the "tool of tools"; Kant, "the visible part of the brain." The earliest works of art were handprints on the walls of caves. Throughout history hand gestures have symbolized the range of human experience: power, tenderness, creativity, conflict, even (bravo, Michelangelo) the touch of the divine. Without hands, civilization would be inconceivable.

And so the discovery in 2011 of the bones of a dozen right hands, at a site where the ancient Egyptian city of Avaris (today known as Tell el-Dab'a) once stood, was particularly unsettling. The remains were unearthed, most with palms down, from three shallow pits near the throne room of a royal palace. The hands, along with numerous disarticulated fingers, were most likely buried during Egypt's 15th dynasty, from 1640 B.C. to 1530 B.C. At the time, Egypt's eastern Nile Delta was controlled by a dynasty called the Hyksos, which means "rulers of foreign countries."

Although the Hyksos were described by the Ptolemaic Egyptian historian Manetho as “invaders of an obscure race” who conquered the region by force, recent research has shown that they descended from people who had immigrated peacefully over centuries from southwest Asia, now Israel and the Palestinian territories. Eventually, a few rose to power as the Hyksos, basing their power in Avaris.

The Hyksos are widely believed to have introduced the Egyptians to the horse and chariot, glass-working and all sorts of weaponry, including battle axes and composite bows. A recent study published in the journal Nature proposes that the Hyksos had a custom known as the Gold of Valor, which involved taking the hands of enemy combatants as war trophies.

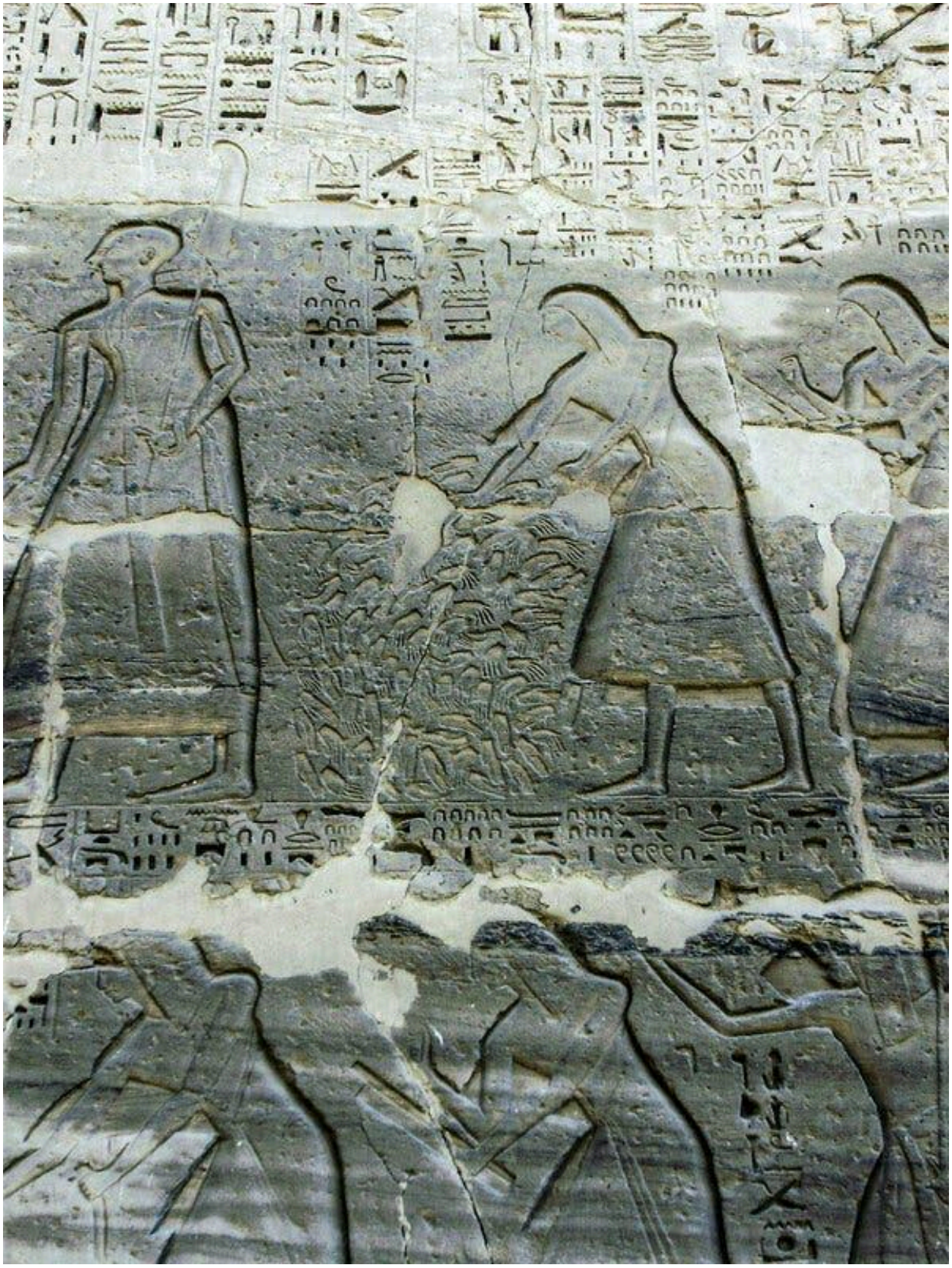
The ritual seems to have become standard practice in Egypt, with soldiers returning from combat and presenting the dismembered right hands of defeated foes to their pharaoh or military commander. “The amputations were a safe means to count slain enemies,” said Manfred Bietak, an archaeologist at the Austrian Academy of Sciences who collaborated on the paper. “They also made the dead enemy incapable of raising his hand again against Egypt in the Netherworld.”

Tomb inscriptions and temple reliefs describe the gruesome public ceremony, but the new study, conducted by a German and Austrian research team and drawn from an analysis of skeletal remains, offers the first physical evidence of it. “Painstaking work was done on the surgical nature of the amputations,” said Kara Cooney, a professor of Egyptian art and architecture at the University of California, Los Angeles. “Flesh and nails are still attached to the hands, providing more information for a carefully gathered collection of hands.”

In 2011, the fragile appendages were hardened with an acetone-soluble glue so that they could be removed from the ground in a block of plaster cast. Poorly preserved, the hands could not be genetically sampled; Julia Gresky, a paleopathologist from the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin, determined their biological sex using a noninvasive measure that compares the length of the index finger with the length of the ring finger.“The ring fingers of males tend to be longer than their index fingers,” Dr. Gresky said. “The opposite is usually true for females.”

Although some critics consider the tool simplistic and unreliable, Dr. Gresky is confident that at least 11 of the 12 hands were male. “Those 11 hands were large and robust,” she said. “The 12th was much smaller and possibly female. I’m quite optimistic that a woman was attached.” Dr. Cooney notes that there are no records of women being soldiers in ancient Egypt. “This was a male sphere of action,” she said. However, Egyptian texts from the reign of Rameses III, from about 1186 B.C. to 1155 B.C., indicate that there were women in the Libyan Army.

All of the bones dug up in Avaris were fully formed but showed no signs of age-related degeneration, suggesting that the hands had belonged to individuals roughly between the ages of 14 and 30. Some Egyptologists had theorized that the dismemberment was a barbaric punishment for criminals, but Dr. Gresky said the location, level of care and perhaps the positioning of the severed hands argued for war trophies. Salima Ikram, an Egyptologist at the American University in Cairo who was not involved in the project, said that the new analysis “raises interesting questions about the origins of traditions showing dominance over enemies, not only in Egypt, but throughout the ancient world.”



A carved relief in the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu in Egypt shows the collection of severed hands after a battle. Credit...via Manfred Bietak

‘Fish in baskets’

The ancient Egyptians are venerated for their achievements in art, architecture, and technology. But their brutal tradition of maiming criminals and adversaries predates the Hyksos by more than a millennium. Perjurers were sometimes disciplined by slicing off their ears and noses; insurgents, by impaling the bodies at the ribs until death. The Narmer Palette, a ceremonial engraving that dates to the time of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt about 5,000 years ago, shows the beheading and mutilation of what were apparently rival chieftains.

On one side of the palette, King Narmer holds a mace aloft in his right hand while with his left he yanks a kneeling captive by the hair. “The smiting motif would have been a public display of King Narmer’s power over his enemy, smashing the skull to bloody bits,” Dr. Cooney said.

On the reverse side, the king inspects rows of bound, decapitated corpses with their heads between their legs, and their castrated penises atop their heads. “Dismemberment was anathema to the ancient Egyptians, who wanted their bodies whole for a materialized afterlife existence,” Dr. Cooney said.

A relief in the mortuary temple of Rameses III, at Medinet Habu, shows the pharaoh standing on a balcony after a victory not far from heaps of his enemies’ severed phalluses (12,312, according to one translation of zealous army scribes) and hands (24,625). In the temple of Amun at Karnak, a chronicle of a 13th century B.C. battle details prisoners being brought back to the pharaoh Merneptah with “donkeys before them, laden with uncircumcised penises of the Land of Libya, with the hands of [every] foreign land that was with them, as fish in baskets.” If the tally of fatalities is to be believed, the Egyptians collected the penises of 6,359 uncircumcised enemy dead and the hands of 2,362 circumcised enemies. “The stink must have been awful, and thus the ‘fish in baskets’ comment,” Dr. Cooney said.

The wrong hand

Except for especially heinous offenses such as robbing the tombs of pharaohs, the severing of hands was a rare punishment in ancient Egypt, which is why Dr. Bietak said it was unlikely that the hands found in Avaris were from criminals. But such severings were a relatively common theme in military scenes of the New Kingdom, which began in the 16th century B.C. and lasted for nearly 500 years.

Dr. Bietak, who has led excavations at Tell el-Dab’a since 1966, said that the Egyptians appear to have adopted the custom some 50 to 80 years earlier than the inscriptional and pictorial evidence. A relief in the temple of Ahmose I in Abydos features a pile of detached hands on the battlefield. Ahmose I was the king who conquered Avaris and defeated the Hyksos.

An overview of a dozen right hands in two pits in Hyksos-period temple in the ancient Egyptian city of Avaris. Credit...Julia Gresky

Were the Avaris hands severed from living victims or from the recently deceased? “When placed in the pits, the hands must have been soft and pliable enough to be stretched into a presentable position,” Dr. Gresky said. “This implies they were put there before rigor mortis set in or after it had passed.” Probably after, she said; the hands would have been collected and stored for some time before they were put in the pit. “If before,” Dr. Gresky said, “then the amputations took place just prior to or even during the offering ceremony.”

Dr. Gresky said the more likely scenario was that the hands were cut off roughly one to four days after death. She noted that the pits would have been visible from the palace throne room, indicating a public ceremony and buttressing the notion that the hands were spoils of war.

So why cut off the right hand? “The right is generally the dominant hand for activity — for writing, working, and fighting,” Dr. Cooney said. “Removing it from a living person is a method of imposing violent control and potentially leaving the living victim of such excision alive for all to see, a walking advertisement not to cross the powers-that-be.”

In the tomb of an army officer named Ahmose, son of Ibana, a narrative describes how after each skirmish with the Hyksos at Avaris and Sharuhen, he reported his new haul of enemy hands to the pharaoh, who rewarded him with the Gold of Valor. Dr. Bietak speculates that the showy regalia involved necklaces of golden beads and pendants in the shape of flies. “Flies are in the thick of battle, they never give up, and keep returning to the fray, just as good soldiers should,” Dr. Ikram said. “Thus, comparing a warrior to a fly was a high compliment.”