

Where Did King Tut Get His Eyebrows?

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In 1922, English archaeologist Howard Carter discovered something spectacular. In Egypt's Valley of the Kings, an underground passage led to an empty room, long ago looted by grave robbers. But searching along the walls of the room, Carter's team found something strange: a secret panel that opened a hidden chamber. Inside was an array of ancient objects, but the most spectacular treasure was farther inside.

Working carefully, Carter and his team spent three weeks excavating the tomb. When they were finally ready, Carter opened the door to the burial chamber inside the tomb. He became the first person in 3,000 years to look upon the sarcophagus of Tutankhamen, an Egyptian pharaoh popularly known as King Tut.

Inside Tutankhamen's tomb were hundreds of artifacts. These included sculptures, gold, and four chariots. There were flowers that had been picked five centuries before the founding of Rome. When the air touched them, Carter watched them disintegrate. But of all the marvels inside Tutankhamen's tomb, none would become more famous than the mask of the pharaoh himself.

Tutankhamen was very young when he became king—only eight or nine years old. He spent his reign living as a child while his advisors made the decisions that affected the kingdom. After about a decade of rule, during a war with the neighboring kingdom of the Hittites, Tutankhamen died suddenly. No one knows how he died, but researchers have speculated that it could have been because of an inherited disease or because of an accidental fall, perhaps from a chariot.

Tutankhamen was mummified in the traditional fashion and buried in a sarcophagus

inside his tomb. On top of the sarcophagus sits a mask made of 24 pounds of solid gold. It shows the boy king wearing an elaborate ceremonial headdress with a long fake beard attached to his chin. It is a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, and must have astonished Howard Carter and the other archaeologists when they discovered it.

Never had a pharaoh's tomb been so well-preserved. By inspecting all of the objects they found, the archaeologists were able to learn an incredible amount about a king who had been largely forgotten. The news of the discovery sparked a worldwide interest in Egyptian culture that affected fashion, architecture, and popular culture all over the Western world. And King Tut's mask was the symbol of the revival.

Of all the features of the mask, perhaps the most interesting are the pharaoh's eyebrows. These thick arches are bright blue, matching the stripes on the headdress, and are made of one of the rarest substances in the ancient world: a stone called "lapis lazuli," which has a history just as interesting as King Tut's tomb itself.

The Ancient Egyptians were talented traders, sending caravans across the desert and boats over the sea. Although the area around the Nile River was rich in some materials, there were many that could not be found there and had to be sent for from far-off lands. Egyptian merchants traded for wood with Lebanon, copper with Cyprus, and incense with the kingdom of Punt. In return, they sent materials that Egypt had in abundance, such as papyrus (an early form of paper) and grain.

But of all the rare goods coveted by the Egyptian ruling classes, few were rarer, or came from farther away, than the stunning blue stone known as lapis lazuli. Its color was rich blue—so blue that the stone's name means "sky stone"—flecked with what appeared to be bits of gold. Across the ancient world, its beauty was prized. Unfortunately, it was very hard to get.

The stunning substance was found only in one place on earth: the mines of Badakhshan,

in what today is northeast Afghanistan. A rugged, mountainous country, it was difficult to extract the rocks, and once they had been mined, it was difficult to send them away. But the stone was valuable enough that traders would risk anything to bring it to market.

Two trade routes led from Badakhshan westward toward the Middle East and Egypt. One, the "northern route," led across the treacherous landscape on the upper border of what is today Iran. The second, the "southern route," began on the Helmand River, proceeding through ancient settlements into the lush land of Mesopotamia. From there, traders continued by land to Egypt, or made their way to the Red Sea to complete their journey by boat. In all, the trip took longer than 2,000 miles—a difficult journey today, but an unfathomable one in 1100 B.C.

Lapis lazuli had many uses for the Egyptians. It was considered a sacred symbol of several gods and goddesses and would be given as an offering to them by those who sought their favor. Judges wore it as a pendant around their neck to symbolize that their power came from Maat, the goddess of truth and balance. And most famously, it was ground into a powder to use as eye shadow and to draw the sacred Eye of Horus. This may be the reason that, when it came time to craft a death mask for Tutankhamen, lapis lazuli was used around the eyes.

The material was so rare that when it came time to make the blue stripes on Tutankhamen's headdress, less-expensive imitation lapis lazuli was used. But for the eyebrows, nothing else would do. Today, you can see the mask on display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Egypt. The eyebrows are as vibrantly blue as they were when Howard Carter discovered them in 1922—and most likely as blue as they were when they were pulled from the earth in Afghanistan, more than 3,000 years ago.