

## The Contents and Significance of Egyptian Alabaster Jars

by Katie L. Kuhlman<sup>1</sup>

The Dunham Bible Museum has many interesting artifacts, but perhaps the most interesting artifact of all is the one that most wouldn't even notice. Sitting in the back of one of the cases is an over 5000 year old alabaster jar, less than a foot tall, that used to hold an amazing variety of examples of ancient Egyptian ingenuity. By looking at this ancient Egyptian jar, one can learn about alabaster and its common uses during the time, the inventions of the Egyptians that were held within it, and how the inventions and contents that they came up with influence us in modern times. From holding perfumes and creams, to decorating the homes of the Egyptian wealthy, jars like this can tell us much about our history as humans, and the influences those before us have had in our every day lives.

Alabaster is a substance that has been used for thousands of years. Even mentioned in the Bible, it is a fine stone that comes in two main types. The first, called "the alabaster of the ancients," and hence the one that was used in the period of the ancient Egyptians, is called Calcite alabaster. It is the harder and stronger of the two, and it was used for the beautiful jars, sculpture and vases that have been found over the years. The second type is called Gypsum alabaster, which has more of a softer quality. Gypsum alabaster was used for smaller reliefs and sculptures, and isn't as strong as Calcite alabaster. Calcite alabaster was used because it was beautiful, and relatively easy to form. Also, there were many Calcite alabaster deposits in Egypt in areas around the towns of Tell el Amarna, and Alabastron, which was named so after the prized material. The ancient Egyptians prized alabaster and even thought of it as being worthy

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay by sophomore Katie Kuhlman received an "Honorable Mention" in the Dunham Bible Museum category in the 2012 "Piece of the Past" museum essay contest.

of possession by their gods. The name alabaster might derive from the Egyptian word *A-labastre*, which honors the Egyptian goddess Bast, the goddess of cats and a guardian of the Pharaoh. One of the alabaster jars found in Pharaoh Tutankhamen's tomb depicted a crouching cat on top of it, in her honor. Jars or vases like the one in Tut's tomb were used for perfumes, which were specialties of the ancient Egyptians. The alabaster jar in the museum is made from Calcite alabaster, and might have been used to contain perfume, but perhaps also a variety of cosmetics, creams, or oils.

Keeping one's skin healthy and looking good were things the Egyptians prized. They were the ones who invented the time's most effective sun blocks and moisturizers, and they were experts when it came to oils and cosmetics. Due to the blistering heat and scorching sun, their skin was often very dry. To remedy this, they would rub various scented oils, like olive oil or rosemary, into their skin on a daily basis. They found that oil mixed with jasmine helped keep their skin from burning when they were out in the hot sun, making a kind of sun block. They also sometimes used honey, because it smelled sweet and moisturized their skin. Oils would even be mixed with animal fat to make a moisturizing cream. The Egyptians also wore makeup daily. They rimmed their eyes with kohl, not only for its attractive appearance, but to help keep the sun's reflecting rays out of their eyes. This had the same function that it does when modern day football players put black paint under their eyes. It was so normal for every Egyptian to use oil and makeup every day that there is even an account of a group of workers who went on strike for a month because they had run out of makeup and oil, which was usually included in their wages. They demanded more from their master before they would start working again. Eventually they got their wish. It seems extreme, but the use of cosmetics and oils was essential to healthy living.

for any ancient Egyptian worker, and for anyone else for that matter. These oil and makeup products would all be kept in little jars, like the alabaster one in the museum.

The Egyptians also took pride in smelling good, and being clean. They thought that smelling badly was impure, and therefore invented many different fragrances and perfumes. Although sometimes their perfume would be mixed with fat and hardened to make a solid block of perfume, they would also heat the ingredients with oil and store them in jars of alabaster or clay. They loved the fragrance of perfume so much, that they would sometimes pour the entire jar over the top of their wigs, letting it run down their faces and bodies (Iiies). The richer one was, the more one could afford to douse themselves. As evidenced by the size of some of the alabaster jars archaeologists have found in tombs, the more perfume the better (Ronca). This also applied to the use of soaps and body scrubs. The more wealthy ancient Egyptians would bathe maybe twice a day, using many different kinds of soaps. These soaps were not the bar soaps we use today, but rather creams made of clay, oils, and some herbs. The combination would cleanse the skin, and leave it soft. To make a body scrub, they would mix the soap with salt or sand to take off any dead skin (Ronca). As with the makeup, oils, and perfumes, the soaps and body scrubs would be kept in jars of varying sizes that were often made of alabaster.

The alabaster jar in the museum's display case could have held any one of the products mentioned. It could have belonged to a rich noble, or it could have belonged to an ordinary Egyptian citizen who wanted to have the luxury of an alabaster jar. Whatever it's contents, and whoever it belonged to, it is amazing to see that it has survived all of these years to now sit in a display at Houston Baptist University. When I think about how much that little, what some would say is insignificant, jar has seen and represented, I wonder what it would have been like to be alive during those times. I wonder what the smell of ancient Egyptian perfume was like, or if

the moisturizing creams and oils they used worked as well as ours do today. This jar represents the every day life of Egyptians over 5000 years ago. The jar, when one looks at all the ingenuity and culture surrounding it, tells an amazing story about the culture of the ancient Egyptians. It tells of the every day citizen. In the end, it is the smaller artifacts, which we sometimes don't even notice, that say the most about history.

#### Works Cited

"Alabaster- Definition." [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com/). Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 2012. Web. 11 Feb 2012. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alabaster>>.

Iiies , J.. "Ancient Egyptian Eye Makeup." *Tour egypt*. N.p., 2011. Web. 11 Feb 2012. <<http://www.touregypt.net/egypt-info/magazine-mag09012000-mag4.htm>>.

"Oils and Ointments in Ancient Egypt." *Eternal Egypt*. eternalegypt.org, 2005. Web. 17 Feb 2012.

<[http://www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?ee\\_website\\_action\\_key=action.display.module&language\\_id=1&story\\_id=5&module\\_id=34](http://www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?ee_website_action_key=action.display.module&language_id=1&story_id=5&module_id=34)>

Ronca, Debra. "Five Ancient Egyptian Cosmetics." *Discovery Fit and Health*. Discovery.com, 2011. Web. 17 Feb 2012. <<http://health.howstuffworks.com/skin-care/beauty/skin-and-makeup/5-ancient-egyptian-cosmetics3.htm>>.

"Tutankhamun:The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs." *The golden king and the great pharaohs*. National Geographic, 2011. Web. 17 Feb 2012. <<http://www.kingtut.org/>>.