

HUMAN LICE ON MUMMIES AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

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From Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian and Biblical (Ex. 8:16-18) sources is evident that the ancient inhabitants of the Middle East were well acquainted with human lice. Lice are mentioned in the Bible as the 3rd plague visited on the Egyptians when Pharaoh denied the request of Moses to let the Israelites go. Head louse eggs, *Pediculus humanus capitis*, were recovered from hair samples of an individual who lived 9,000 yr ago in Nahal Hemar Cave. In the 16th century BC, an Egyptian text, known as the Papyrus Ebers, described a remedy for lice prepared from date flour. Head lice and egg were found on the hair of Egyptian mummies. Royal combs from Pharonic times in Egypt were used for delousing. Head lice and their eggs were also found in 12 out of 24 hair combs recovered from archaeological excavations in the Judean and Negev deserts of Israel, including from Masada and Qumran. The combs date from the first century BC to the eighth century AD. Lice combs similar in shape to those used today have been known for at least 3,500 years and were effective tools for the control of head lice near the Dead Sea. Head lice and eggs were also found in a wooden comb excavated in Antinoë, Egypt and dated between the fifth and sixth centuries AD. A body louse, *Pediculus humanus humanus*, was found in one of the rooms of the Casemate Wall at Masada fortress, known as the “Casemate of the Scrolls”. Originally constructed during the last decade of King Herod’s reign, the Casemate Room was converted into a dwelling unit during the first Jewish revolt (AD 66-74). The rebels concentrated in this locus hundreds of ballista balls, during the construction works of the “Wood and Soil Wall” that took place towards the very last stages of the siege. Following the conquest of Masada, the room was used by the Roman soldiers as a dumping area. Looted objects were concentrated there by the Romans, who left behind some of their documents as well. The context of the textiles – among dumped material – and more important, the poor quality of the textiles associated with the louse, clearly suggest a rebel origin.