

Greece and Egypt: a knotty problem

PLATES XIV-XV

Dr A. W. Johnston, Department of Classical Archaeology, University College, London, poses a problem for readers of ANTIQUITY.

The object which I present here is to my knowledge unique, whatever interpretation we may put upon it; and I add those last words advisedly, since I cannot be confident about any of the three possible assessments of it which I will put forward. A microscopic scrutiny of its surface would perhaps afford important clues, even a resolution of the problem, but failing that, I can merely ask for the opinions of readers of ANTIQUITY who feel they can make any useful contribution.

The piece is a much battered and summarily carved wooden statue, recognizable basically as a Greek kouros, in a private collection. It is between a third and a half life-size (the preserved height is 0.56 m.). The legs are missing below the knees, though the left one was clearly bent, and the arms and face have been sawn off. The preserved surfaces are all much worn, so that I doubt whether any original surface is preserved at all. When bought it had been fitted out with a new face and arms, which were speedily removed, though a clearly recognizable modern patch has been left, covering much of the top of the scalp where it

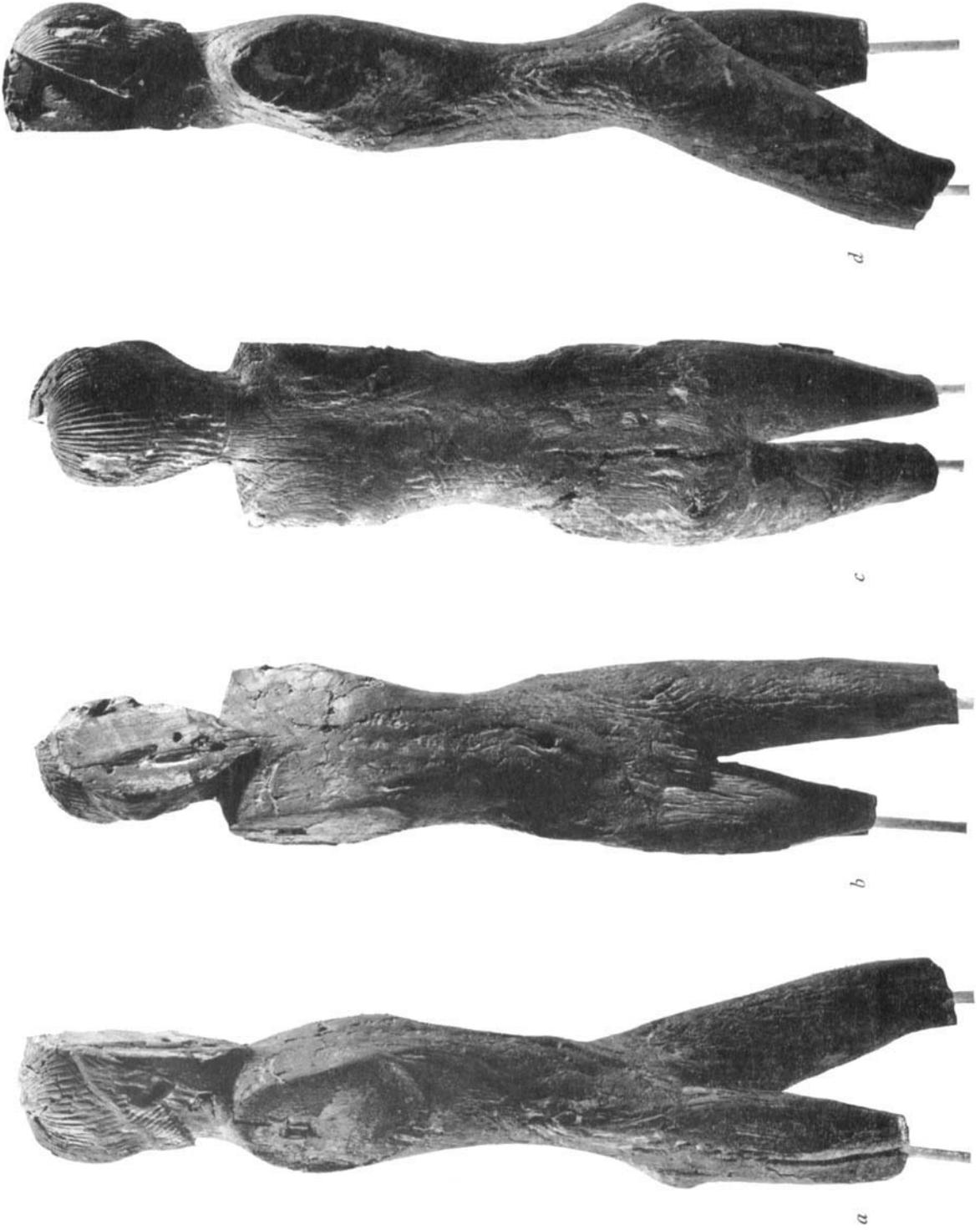


PLATE XIV: GREECE AND EGYPT: A KNOTTY PROBLEM (see facing page)



a

b

PLATE XV: GREECE AND EGYPT: A KNOTTY PROBLEM

PLATE XIV (*facing*): Four views of the carved wooden statue: PLATE XV (*this page*) Enlargement of (*a*) right side of head; (*b*) front of head

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is betrayed by a stained surface and generally less worn and more regularly cut hair lines. The core of the wood is largely in good condition, though the piece has in fact been reassembled from a few fragments in recent years; there was little difficulty or danger in drilling out samples for analysis from the cut surface of the right shoulder. I will return to these cut surfaces later; the state of preservation of the core of the wood makes it difficult to judge their antiquity and that of the various dowel holes on the face, shoulders and base of spine. All seemed modern to me, including the remnant of a wooden dowel preserved in the right shoulder. There appears to be a worm-hole, part cut away, at the front of the left shoulder, though one could hardly insist on the priority of the hole to the cutting.

The photographs will excuse me from describing the preserved parts and details—which are few and simple. A groove runs round the head above the ears, though it is far less marked above the lost left ear, while the striations of the hair run uninterrupted across it. The navel is large, the pubes very worn, the thighs slim and unmodelled, PLS. XIV–XV.

For reasons which I hope will become clear, I and others (whom, as things turned out, it would perhaps be unfair to name) took the piece as Greek work of the early fifth century BC, and, as such, a very considerable rarity when size and date are taken into consideration (Richter, 1970, 8). Yet the results of the analysis of the wood carried out by the Research Laboratory of the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens demand a complete re-appraisal. I was perhaps prepared to be told that the whole was modern, but I quote:

We have obtained a date for the figure as follows: (BM-1074) 3817 ± 140 bp (c. 1867 BC). . . . The 'corrected' value of this date in calendar terms would probably be about 2200–2300 ± 150 BC. The error term of the uncorrected date is larger than we normally expect in practice for samples of about that age but this is accounted for by the very small size of the sample available in this case (Dr. R. Burleigh).

The small wood sample taken from a (Greek) statue agrees in structure with that of the

Acacias. It is of the type with confluent to banded parenchyma and broad rays, represented in our reference collection by *Acacia negevensis*, *A. seyal* and *A. tortilis* distributed in areas from North Africa to Israel (Dr M. Y. Stant).

Taken together these two results point clearly to the statue being (originally) an Egyptian artifact of about the XIIth Dynasty; the use of acacia in Egypt is well attested (Lucas, 1962, 439 ff.), being termed *akanthos* by the Greeks (e.g. Herodotos, ii, 96), but it has not been found in use in the Greek world. We must now face the question whether our statue is an Egyptian Middle Kingdom piece and nothing more, or whether, necessarily accepting that the wood was first employed at that period, we should regard it as a Greek reworking of some kind, or indeed a more modern production.

I am not an Egyptologist, and what I have to say on the first possibility is confined to general comment; yet I would venture to say that even this shows that the position is hardly tenable. It is not easy to find any close parallel for the substantial curvature of the spine and the quite considerable bend of the left knee, not indeed for the proportions of the body as a whole. Yet more serious are the difficulties concerning the hairstyle and lack of clothing; very few Middle Kingdom statues are naked and although short hairstyles are a little more common there is nothing which can be closely compared with our statue in this respect (Vandier, 1958, 249ff.); Cairo 505 is just comparable, but the treatment of the hair at the back is different and nothing in the rest of the piece, save the use of wood, bears any similarity at all. A point to which I will return is the length of the face; however we interpret the remains, the resulting face would have been much longer than any to be seen in Egypt.

Let us now turn to consider whether the piece may be a later reworking of a Middle Kingdom artifact. First of all, it may be pertinent to ask 'what sort of artifact?'; I dare say speculation could run riot here, but I content myself with observing that the angle of the left knee and especially the length of the face do not support the idea of a mere freshen-

ing up of a similar Egyptian standing male figure at a later date.

The first period at which any such reworking could have been carried out would be the early fifth century BC; without the 'assistance' of the scientific findings the piece would have been most at home here. Youths in Greek sculpture do not begin to wear their hair short until the later sixth century, the leading example being the Rayet head in Copenhagen, Richter no. 138, which is also one of the earliest pieces (at c. 520 BC) on which the hair radiates from the crown of the head. Yet the hair on the neck of our piece seems rather a feeble rendering or even recollection of those late archaic styles in which long hair is plaited and tied around the back of the head, as in the Strangford Apollo, or in an already careless form a kouros in Nicosia (Richter nos. 156 and 180; Ridgway, 1972, Figs 72–102), an area probably nearer the place of any reworking at this period. A date earlier than c. 490 for such a treatment would not be readily acceptable.

However, the rest of the body is far stiffer than we would expect at this date, even in a second-rate work; the proportions recall, rather, Richter's Melos group of the third quarter of the sixth century, where slimness and simplicity of forms are probably due to considerable Ionian influence. Such an impression would only be confirmed by arms adhering closely to the sides, a possibility which cannot be ignored in view of the slightly raised areas at each hip (best seen in the rear view photograph, PL. XIVc); I find it difficult to interpret them as merely a raised surface of the hip rather than the remnants of the hands once laid against the flanks. Such an interpretation does of course open up all kinds of ramifications in any arguments that may be put forward concerning the sawing off of the shoulders and the dowel-holes in them. What should be taken into consideration is the likely size of the timber available; were the arms not held by the sides it would have been necessary to dowel them on, and similar considerations may have dictated the stance of the left leg.

As for the face, Professor B. S. Ridgway has suggested to me that the figure may originally

have been bearded—which would surely rule out a straight Egyptian interpretation—and unless the carving of the head were unusually inept, or the neck curiously bovine, her suggestion is indeed attractive. Were it not for the difficulty over the position of the arms, we could then start to compare the piece (albeit at several artistic removes!) with works such as Aristogeiton and the Poseidon/Zeus from Artemision.

If a Greek reworking of an Egyptian timber were demonstrated it would be necessary to examine far more deeply some of these questions, and pose further ones, especially the state of the timber when discovered, the identity of the artist, and how and why the statue was preserved once again. The lack of any numbers of Greek statues in Egypt under the period of Persian domination would be a complicating factor. Yet we must move on to consider the possibility of more modern adaptation of the piece (without ruling out *a priori* any period between 475 BC and AD 1935). Certainly it was equipped with a new face and arms by the dealer or his supplier before it was acquired by the present owner in the later 1940s. A provenance of a lake on the island of Samos was also given to it, but very probably on the grounds of the discovery of wooden objects at the Samian Heraion by the German Institute shortly before the war; the story that this piece was found at the same time is difficult to accept since all the wooden objects unearthed during the excavations are substantially earlier; Professor Homann-Wedeking also points out that it would have been most difficult if not impossible for illicit diggers to have tapped the stratum of the German excavations in question, and that in any case the surface condition of the wood from Samos seems to differ from that of our piece.

The probable application of a false provenance does not tell in favour of the authenticity of the piece, though it is a common enough event. I cannot tell whether the dealer knew of any sort of Egyptian pedigree or not, nor consequently what reasons he may have had for denying it. It seems to me improbable that an Egyptian wooden artifact should be

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worked to resemble a very modest Greek kourous; to do this it would have been necessary at the very least to recut the hair. As I have noted there is a modern patch in the hair; to combine such patching with the recutting and artificial ageing of the rest of the scalp scarcely seems commensurate with the mediocrity of the whole. A curious feature is a 'skin' of darker wood to be seen around much of the head in the frontal section; I do not know whether this can be the product of a natural process or modern tinkering.

It is frustrating not being able to come to any decision. The wood is undoubtedly about four thousand years old and probably of Egyptian origin, but all three explanations which I have put forward have distinct drawbacks, the most stubborn perhaps being the hairstyle and length of face, if we think in terms of an Egyptian original, the unique circumstances of discovery and preservations if it were a Greek reworking, and the care and cunning expended on a slight work if modern treatment were suspected. If I favour the second alternative it may merely be because my knowledge of

Egyptian Middle Kingdom sculpture is not deep enough. Further discussion of the piece is necessary; I hope here at least to have adumbrated its more peculiar aspects.

Some measurements in metres :

preserved height	0.56
height of head	0.125 over cut surface
chin to navel	0.177
navel to groin	0.088
groin to knee	0.13 vertically
max. width of head	0.08
preserved width of shoulders	0.102
width at hips	0.116
max. preserved stride	0.13

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