

APPENDIX 2 THE SPHINX HANDLE

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CONTEXT

This object (N553) was found in L84, Area 3, Trench XII, just west of the central plateau of the tell (Figs. 9, 124 and 127). The context is Phase XII. The bone object was found on the floor of one of the rooms (L84) which was extended to form Trench XLIII (wherein L365 is the continuation of L84) in order to find the boundaries of this room and to obtain samples for radiocarbon dating.

The oblong room is about 3 m wide (NW/SE), and at least 5 m long. It is only partly excavated. It is entered from the north-east through a courtyard or second room. The entrance in W518/119, flanked by larger stones, is 1.10 m wide, and has a stone threshold and sockets for door leaves. The floor of the room, covered by about 1 m of debris of collapsed mudbrick tiles and ash, is carefully paved with small stones, with clay between them. The remains inside the burnt-down building show signs of intense heat. The bone object was found on the floor of the room, embedded in clay, which no doubt explains how it could survive the fire so well. However, it has been affected by the surroundings, showing a light-grey, but still burnished and almost glazed, surface. A ring of bronze was also found on the floor. A great deal of pottery was collected from the floor of the room, which includes some intact or complete shapes. The pottery repertoire from this room included bowls, chalices, an incense cup, kraters, a trough, two jugs, of which one is of likely Phoenician origin, a strainer-jug, juglets, a hole-mouth krater/jar, storage jars, cooking pots and a lamp (see a selection of (partly) complete shapes in Figs. 125 and 126). Additional finds are connected with the production of textiles: These are two bone shuttles, two limestone spindle whorls and six loom weights of secondarily fired clay (some in Fig. 125). There are also quite a few pieces of charcoal along the wall to the south-east (W517) which most likely derive from a burnt-down loom which had been leaning against the wall.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPHINX HANDLE (Figs. 127, 453:3, 464)

The dimensions are as follows (in cm): height 12.5, upper part 5.5×4.1 , lower part 4.1×3.3 , maximum

bone thickness 0.9; dimensions of the bottom stopper: 2.8×1.8 tapering to 2.3×1.3 , thickness 0.4; diameter of dowel holes 0.2. Surface treatment: burnished to a high gloss.

The bone object is virtually complete; all that is missing is some minor fragments from the lower part. It was cut from a long bone, most likely the femur or tibia of a bovid. It is oval, hollow and slightly wider at the top than the bottom. The rim at the top is pierced by two dowel holes. The base was closed by an oval stopper which was found loose inside the object, somewhat out of position. The stopper neatly fills the bottom and would have been held in position with a material such as resin. We suggested in our previous reports that our object represents the handle of, for instance, a fan or flywhisk (FISCHER and HERRMANN 1995) or a sceptre (FISCHER 2009b).

The main zone of decoration occupies much of the upper two-thirds of the piece. The design consists of two sphinxes walking to the left. The bodies are shown in profile, while the heads are represented frontally. The modelled full and fleshy faces are framed by heavy wigs, and below the chins are curving, undecorated collars. The aprons are decorated with horizontal lines. The bases of the wings are incised with criss-cross lines and the main wing-feathers are also incised. The sphinxes' tails are curled upwards and are partially concealed by the wing tips. No musculature is indicated on the shoulder or body. The front edges of the paws are modelled. The sphinxes' heads extend to the top and are linked by a frame consisting of a moulded rim and a band with incised lines. There is a dowel hole at the centre of each forehead. The sphinxes are walking on a band decorated with criss-cross lines above a convex band with a twisted-rope motif. Below is a band of hanging palmettes above a ribbed frame. The bottom is plain and flares out slightly. The relief is low with incised details.

PARALLELS IN BONE

Nimrud

The closest parallels to the bone object from Tell Abu al-Kharaz come from the Burnt Palace at Nimrud, where they were excavated by W. K. Loftus in the



Fig. 464 The Sphinx handle

nineteenth century and published much later by BARNETT (1957). Although most of the published pieces are made of elephant ivory, there is a coherent group of six pieces made of bone.

By far the most similar object as regards the principal shape and decorative elements is S 68, BM 126568 (BARNETT 1957: 196, pl. XLI). The more fragmentary Nimrud piece is slightly larger, measuring roughly 14.4 × 4 cm. It has a similar plain, slightly splayed foot with a ribbed band separating it from the row of hanging palmettes. The main design area is framed above and below by guilloche bands instead of the criss-cross frame below the Abu al-Kharaz sphinxes. There is a plain moulding around the top edge of the rim. The design consists of a pair of sphinxes, couchant to the left, separated by a short plant. They are wearing a fluted crown of indeterminate type, above a misunderstood version of the pharaonic headcloth. Their faces are full and fleshy, and the bases of their wings and shoulders are decorated with criss-cross lines.

The very fragmentary S 63, BM 126581 (*ibid.* 196, pl. XL) is similar in form and size to the Tell Abu al-Kharaz piece, although the decorative elements are entirely different. It is somewhat shorter than our object (original height approximately 12.0 cm, width at top 5.7 cm, width at base 4.2 cm). There is a similar plain, slightly splayed foot with a ribbed band separating it from the row of hanging palmettes. The main design consists of the remains of a pair of antelopes, framed above and below by plain bands, with another wide moulded band above. This is decorated with the remains of two pairs of hanging volutes, separated by a curved moulding. The antelopes are shown grazing to the left. A surviving horn is decorated with a criss-cross design, and the neck with incised lines. Between their legs are small hummocks, again decorated with a criss-cross design. One of the missing (unpublished) pieces, ND 1525, was found by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq in the Long Room of the Burnt Palace, and is now in the Iraq Museum. It does not retain its original edges, and it shows part of the central register of a bone handle with the hindquarters of an antelope to the left above a mound with criss-cross decorations. The Iraq Museum piece forms a photographic join with S 63, BM 126581.

Other pieces of bone which replicate elements of the design of the Tell Abu al-Kharaz object are the tall S 70, BM 123864 (*ibid.* 196, pl. XL), and the fragmentary S 67, BM 126567 (*ibid.* 196, pl. XL). Other related pieces are S 69, BM 118105 (*ibid.* 196, pls. XLIV–XLV) and S 56, BM 126564 (*ibid.* 195, pl. XXXIX).

Hazor and Tell en-Nasbeh

A fragmentary bone handle from Hazor Stratum VI (YADIN 1958: 16, pls. CL–CLI; WINTER 1981: 115, n. 108) is comparable with S 70, BM 123864, and S 67, BM 126567. The principal design is a four-winged man associated with a plant bearing a fan-like top and two buds. It is framed above and below with a raised band with incised lines. Another larger fragment of a bone handle depicting horned animals was recently found in Stratum VI at Hazor (HARUSH 2012: 564, 565, fig. 13.1:1). A fairly close parallel to the handle from Hazor is from Tell en-Nasbeh (McCOWN 1947: pl. 55). The context of the latter is unfortunately not known.

PARALLELS IN IVORY

Hazor

There are a few ivories which may have been made in the same workshops as the bone group. The most notable of these are a pyxis from Hazor and ivory fragments from Nimrud. The Hazor pyxis measures only 7.5 cm in height and was found in Stratum V (YADIN 1958: 41, pl. CLV). The design occupies the lower zone of the pyxis and depicts a male figure kneeling to the right, hands raised to a palmette plant, and behind him a winged sphinx or griffin advancing left.

Nimrud

There are two fragments of furniture panels found in Room SW 37 at Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud. One is ND 9729 (HERRMANN 1986: 143, no. 549, pl. 127) which shows the front of a human-headed sphinx. The physiognomy is similar to those of the sphinxes of S 68, BM 126568, and S 70, BM 123864: curved nose, prominent chin, and fleshy cheeks. However, more striking than a general facial resemblance is the unusual form of the fan crown, unique among the Fort Shalmaneser sphinxes, and similar to that worn by the sphinxes on the bone objects. The second panel fragment, ND 9607 (*ibid.* 138, no. 518, pl. 115), also shows the front of a human-headed sphinx with sun-disc and uraeus-crown on the *nemes* headcloth. The form of the folds of the headcloth can be compared with that of the Nimrud sphinxes of S 68, BM 126568, while the physiognomy is similar to that of the group as a whole.

POSSIBLE FUNCTION AND PROVENANCE

The function of the object from Tell Abu al-Kharaz was most likely that of a handle, for instance, of a sceptre, fan or flywhisk. It may be the case that the surface of the object was already intentionally polished during the manufacturing process but the shiny

surface may also be the result of frequent use as a handle. The well-preserved Tell Abu al-Kharaz piece has a pair of dowel holes perforating the rim at the top, which have not survived on the fragmentary Nimrud examples. These dowel holes must have been used to fix something to the object. The context in which the handle was found is interesting. In addition to the pottery there are finds which clearly connect this room with the production of textiles: bone shuttles, loom weights, spindle whorls and the likely remains of a wooden loom. Therefore, it may also be possible that the object represents the handle of a tool which was used during the production of textiles.

The presence of similar material on two adjacent sites in Palestine is of particular significance in any attempt to define the possible location and date of the centre of production of this group of bone and ivory objects. That rather more pieces were found at Nimrud than at Hazor and Abu al-Kharaz is of little relevance, for the Assyrian habit of sweeping luxury goods from all over their empire to their capital cities is too well known to need documentation.

The bone and ivory group, which shows a devolved kinship with Egyptian iconography, may have been made in a Palestinian workshop. The discovery of the Abu al-Kharaz handle is of considerable importance, for it has permitted the better definition of a coherent group, identification of the possible location of the centre of production, and more realistic dating of their production and final deposition.

CHRONOLOGY

Concerning relative chronological consideration, most of the dates of published parallels to our pottery types from Phase XII are from the 9th or 8th centuries BCE. We date our Phase XII to the second half of the 9th century BCE (see Table 83). This is also valid

where the comparable objects from Palestine are concerned. The handle from Hazor Stratum VI is placed in the 8th century BCE by the excavator (BEN-TOR *et al.* 2012: 3).

A considerable part of the 1998 season of excavation was devoted to extracting datable radiocarbon samples from the room in which the sphinx handle was found. Three samples were taken from the floor for radiocarbon dating: one of burnt mudbrick with straw, the second of animal bone, and the third of charcoal from small twigs. The first two samples were analysed at the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit. Neither sample yielded enough carbon for a reliable determination. This accords with our earlier experiences with bone samples from the site, where it seems that the local environment causes most of the bone protein to be lost over time.

The third sample was successfully analysed by the Vienna Environmental Research Accelerator (sample no. VERA-1412; see Chapter 4). The spread of the dates is considerable, which is explained in the plateau of the calibration curve after roughly 750 BCE. The only means of resolving this problem would be a radiocarbon data set based on a number of consecutive stratified samples which would allow sequencing. However, such samples are not available at present. The highest 1σ and 2σ data sets, both 800–750 BCE, are nevertheless interesting concerning our first publication on the sphinx handle (FISCHER and HERRMANN 1995): we suggested a date around 800 BCE for the context of the sphinx handle. This date was solely based on the internal occupational sequence and parallels from other sites. It should though be kept in mind that our carved bone object was a prestige good and might have been kept as an heirloom for generations before its ultimate destruction, thus making a 9th century production date for the object possible.