



Kneeling figure with attributes of Osiris

Not on display

Title/Description: Kneeling figure with attributes of Osiris

Born: 1200 c. BC

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 502 mm

Accession Number: 309

Historic Period: Dynasty XIX (c. 1200 BC), 12th century BC

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Doubts have been expressed upon the authenticity of this figure, which iconographically is an enigma. The head-dress is the *atef* commonly associated with Osiris, ruler of the Underworld, and consists of the White Crown often worn by the pharaoh as King of Upper Egypt, flanked by feathers, the latter separately made and attached. The crown itself is of one piece with the statuette. There is a slot above the brow for the *uraeus*, the cobra head intimately associated with Egyptian kingship, now missing.

The face is sensitive, the eyebrows carved in shallow relief, the details of the eyes painted. The nose is aquiline, the ears large and set well back, with small hollows in the lobes indicative of piercing for earrings. The mouth is full, and there is a slight indentation under the chin, but not necessarily for the attachment of a ceremonial beard. The arms consist each of two pieces, jointed at the elbow and attached (presumably pegged) at the shoulder. Both fists are drilled, and each apparently was intended to hold insignia, implements (such as paddles) or other separate items.

The figure kneels on his left knee, the right knee being raised towards the chest. This knee projects slightly into the line of vision between the holes in the fists, showing that probably two objects were carried, rather than a single object held by two hands. The edge of the kilt is indicated on both thighs, and the belt of this garment is carved in low relief. A shallow groove is carved down the back of the torso to indicate the spinal column. The feet are splayed, the toenails not being indicated. The base is an integral part of the figure, which is not, as was customary in Egypt, pegged into it. It is made up of two unequal parts, with three pegs holding the smaller piece on the left side.

There are some remains of colour on the figure, not easy to interpret. The crown was originally coloured black over a thin coating of plaster. The feathers were apparently blue with red-brown cross-bars. There are traces of bluish paint on the face. A decorative broad collar is indicated around the neck, with red-brown drop beads and with traces of black and greenish-blue below. There are some remains of red-brown on the torso and on the limbs, all over a coating of plaster. The kilt was greenish-blue in colour (this pigment could originally have been black, now decayed). The base was coloured, probably black, over a layer of plaster. There are some surface cracks in the figure, which is somewhat worn and discoloured.

The statuette cannot represent Osiris as a deity, since it is inconceivable that he should be represented in a kneeling posture, presenting offerings or holding insignia (other than crook and flail, which would not have been held in this way). For its size the figure is light in weight, which is often an indication of antiquity. That the wood is ancient is confirmed by Carbon 14 analysis, carried out by the Low Level Measurements Laboratory, Harwell in 1984 (har 5858), giving a calibrated date of 1750-1710 BC.

The figure's nearest congeners appear to be the decidedly unusual figures of Underworld gods and demons, as well as figures of kings in symbolic and ritualistic poses, found in a number of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes since the late eighteenth century. These have never been published in detail, though they have been discussed by Abitz (1979). The most complete group was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, though nothing found there resembles the figure under discussion. A figure which is very similar to this piece is illustrated in Forman and Forman (1958: 36-8), but it has no provenance and its authenticity is uncertain.

However, the possibility remains that the present figure represents a deceased and deified king as an Osiris. Two surviving representations depict Rameses III (Dynasty XX) and Osorkon II (Dynasty XXII) squatting in canoes and paddling themselves in the waters of the Underworld (see Chicago, 1963: pl. 469; and Montet, 1947: pl- xxxvi). In both cases the kings wear the *nemes*, one of many varieties of headgear worn by Egyptian rulers, and not the White Crown, and a single paddle is used. Though doubt must remain about the present statuette it is conceivable that it is a representation in the round of something comparable to these scenes.

From painted representations in the tomb of Sethos n at Thebes and from the complete set of actual examples found in the tomb of Tutankhamun it is clear that wooden figures of deities, usually in shrines, were standard items of funerary equipment in the royal tombs of the New Kingdom at Thebes, and were placed near the sarcophagus to aid in the protection of the mummy of the king (Abitz, 1979: *passim*). Hardly any scientific excavation was carried out in the royal tombs prior to the work of Howard Carter, and it is certain that statues, complete and fragmentary, were removed without any records being kept.

Nevertheless, there remains a strong possibility that the figure is of modern manufacture (the sculptor receiving his inspiration from such royal tomb figures), even though, as has been shown, the wood is ancient. Fragments of ancient wood, once forming part of tomb equipment discarded by plunderers, are still easy to come by in ancient cemeteries in the Nile Valley; forgers of Egyptian objects have been busy in Egypt and elsewhere since the nineteenth century. If the object is genuine it would date to Dynasties XIX-XX (c. 1293-1070 BC). The discrepancy between these dates and the result of the C14 test on the wood is not necessarily significant: old wood must often have been used in Egypt, a country not plentifully supplied with timber, and some recycling' of materials certainly took place. In addition, C14 dates on wood depend on the age of the wood when it was felled for timber.

As a piece of sculpture it has been admired both by artists and connoisseurs, and has been called by one authority on Egyptian art, 'the masterpiece of a faker'.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Known to be in the possession of Sydney Burney in the 1930s.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in April 1955.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
