Ancient Egyptian Wooden Objects at Arizona State Museum
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Abstract
Publication of six wooden pieces in the Arizona State Museum at the University of Arizona in the city of Tucson, state of Arizona, United States of America. These six wooden pieces are kneeling statuettes of Isis and Nephthys, a hawk (Horus) statuette, a statuette of a Nubian figure, a hand, and a fragment of a painted coffin. Wood was used in ancient Egypt for different purposes such as making statues, furniture, coffins, and funeral boxes. Ancient Egyptian local woods are sycamore fig, the Nile acacia, tamarisk, Carob, Dom Palm, and Date Palm. Although Egypt was not that rich in producing local wood of good quality, the ancient Egyptians tried very hard to overcome this problem by using what nature gave them. People of lower classes especially used that local wood in producing statuettes, furniture, and coffins.

Keywords: Egyptian local wood, Arizona State Museum, Isis, Nephthys, Horus, Statuette, Nubian, Hand, Coffin

Introduction
The Arizona State Museum (ASM hereafter) has a small collection of Egyptian artifacts, including ceramic vessels from the Predynastic and Dynastic Periods, lamps, statuettes, amulets, and miscellaneous artifacts from all periods. In this article, we present for the first time six wooden objects from this collection, which were collected in the Nineteenth century and early Twentieth Century AD.

Wood was used in ancient Egypt for different purposes such as making statues, furniture, coffins, and funeral boxes. Ancient Egyptian local woods are sycamore fig (Ficus sycomorus) nht (see Hannig, 2006: 442; WB II: 282 [7-13]; Gale et al., 2000: 340- 341), the Nile acacia (Acacia nilotica) ^ndt/^nd (see Gale et al., 2000: 335-336; Hepper, 1990: 22-23), tamarisk (Tamarix nilotica and Tamarix aphylla) jsr (see Wb. I: 130; Hannig, 2006: 116-117; Gale et al. 2000: 345), Carob (Ceratonia siliqua) nDm (see Baum, 1988: 162-168; Lucas and Harris, 1989: 443; Gale et al., 2000: 338), Dom Palm (Hyphaene thebaica) mAm (see Hannig, 2006: 338; Gale et al., 2000: 347; Lucas and Harris, 1989: 444; Baum, 1988: 106-120), and Date Palm (Phoenix dactylifera) bnrt (see Greiss, 1957: 41-48, 112, 114, 147-148; Hannig, 2006: 271; Baum, 1988: 90-106; Gale et al., 2000: 347-348). These species usually produced not good quality wood with short lengths and cross section which limited the kinds of constructions (see Killen, 2001: 516-519). Ancient Egypt’s imported woods (see Davies, 1989: 146-156) are cedar (Cedrus libani) mrw/a^ (see Meiggs, 1982: 49-87; Wb. I: 228

Two Kneeling Wooden Female Figurines
These two figurines depict the ancient Egyptian goddesses Isis and her sister Nephthys (Servajean, 2008), the first mourners in ancient Egyptian mythology whose role was focused on mourning over the dead as they did over their dead brother Osiris, the god of the dead and the hereafter.

A Kneeling Deity Statuette: Isis or Nephthys (ASM #13203) (Figure 1)
Provenance: Egypt, provenience unknown
Material: Wood, probably local Egyptian
Dimensions: H. 0.193; Max. W. from knee: 0.05; Max. Depth 0.065 m.
Date of Acquisition: May, 1924
Donor: Miss Lily S. Place, collected in Cairo in the 1920s
A kneeling figure in the attitude of prayer, carved in the round, decorated in green, reddish-brown and black paint in a slightly sloppy fashion over a ground of white gesso (plaster). Nearly intact with well-preserved painted decoration; many chips missing from surface especially from top of head. It is attached at the bottom to a modern wooden base with a probably modern wooden dowel. The figure holds her two parallel hands cupped and toward her face; hands are flat with indentations on top to indicate fingers. The head is block-like with painted details: long black wig with a straight line across the forehead, locks falling to her small round bare breasts and in back above her waist. The eyes are treated slightly differently, the left eye is more boldly outlined as an elongated oval with thick black eye liner surrounding the eye and continuing to the hair line; the eyeball is attached to the upper lid as if the figure is looking upward. The right eye is smaller than the left one with a large circle for the eyeball in the middle of the eye. The left eyebrow, painted in black, is thicker than the right one and is treated as a raised surface. The oval ears are carved, and in front of them are possibly painted earrings. The chin is flat on the bottom. Very high cheekbones and sunken cheeks. The skin of the face, bare upper body and the arms is painted reddish-brown. Her back is curved to her waist, her lower body is painted in green to indicate a skirt that covers her to her ankles. Her bare feet are pointed down and the bottom surface is outlined in black. A hole has been drilled in the bottom surface to receive the dowel (ancient [?]).
Part of a pair with # 13204. The figure is probably made of local wood. The painting and style of carving are rather crude. It is obvious that both statuettes came from a regional workshop and were made by a local artist. They almost
certainly came from a tomb and were placed at the head and foot of the coffin, probably attached to a coffin box-put there to give the dead the absolute protectiveness the two sisters could offer. Isis and her sister Nephthys were the prototypes for mourners in ancient Egyptian civilization when they were crying over their brother Osiris. They often appear in Egyptian art with Nephthys standing at the head of her brother (later at the head of the deceased) and Isis at his feet. Isis and Nephthys give the deceased the breath of life which the tomb owner needs to be reborn in the underworld. In ancient Egyptian art the depth of human feelings was depicted with gestures more than facial features. For example, a woman who was mourning was depicted raising one hand in front of her head, perhaps referring to throwing sand upon the head, or covering the face with a hand while crying (Malék, 2003: 289). Some of the famous funeral scenes in ancient Egyptian art are those from Remože’s tomb (TT 55) (Kozloff, 2009: 40-50; Hodel-Hones, 2000; Martín Valentín, 1991: 57-78), and the vizier Nespakashuty (from Dynasty 26) (Pischikova 1998: 57-101; 2002: 967-977; 2006: 13-18). Isis appears in the Pyramid Texts over 80 times assisting the deceased king. In later periods her protective role extended to nobles and common people. According to the Heliopolitan sun cult, Isis and Osiris were children of Geb and Nut; then she became his wife and helped him rule over Egypt. After her husband’s death and dismemberment by his half-brother Seth, Isis along with her sister Nephthys mourned and began to collect the parts of his scattered body. Among Isis’s many aspects are as mother and protector to Horus, mother of the king, goddess of cosmic association, “great of magic” Wrt @qAw (Ouda, 2014), mourner, and sustainer and protector of the deceased. Isis is represented in the form of a woman wearing a long tight dress and crowned with her name, the hieroglyphic “throne” sign. From the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty, she is crowned with the solar disk between two horns (Wilkinson, 2003: 146-149). Her special symbol is an amulet known as the “tyet.” Isis is the Greek name of the Egyptian goddess “Aset” or “Eset” Ast. In fact, Isis was very well liked by the Greeks and Romans. Isis was thought to watch over the people of the Nile while her husband Osiris spread civilization to the rest of the world. In many ancient Egyptian texts, Isis is one of the Ennead, a group of nine gods and goddesses involved in the origins of all things. First there was Atum, “the all,” who brought into being Shu, “air,” and Tefnut, “moisture.” Shu and Tefnut together had two children, Geb, “earth,” and Nut, “sky.” Geb and Nut had four children, Osiris, Seth, Isis and Nephthys. Isis and her sister Nephthys collected the parts of Osiris’s body, whereupon Isis brought Osiris back to life long enough to get pregnant with his son. Isis gave birth to the god Horus, who later fought against Seth for the right to succeed Osiris on the throne. Isis, along with her husband and brother, Osiris, was most often associated with the funerary cult
and the afterlife. She was thought to guard the internal organs of a deceased person at the time of judgment. Isis, Osiris, and Horus were especially worshipped at the city of Abydos, but reverence for all of them was widespread. Isis made the first mummy from the scattered parts of Osiris using her wings to give him the breath of life (Shaw and Nicholson, 1995: 142; Pinch, 2002: 149-152). Isis was associated with dawn, while her sister Nephthys was associated with twilight. An annual “Lamentations of Isis” was held in Egypt, commemorating the moment when Isis and Nephthys bewailed the death of Osiris (Griffiths, 2001: 188-191). The identity of Isis was transformed in the Hellenistic Period as a moon goddess, and during post-Pharaonic eras, the cult of Isis expanded to become a universal cult (Delia, 1998: 539-550).

The ASM statuettes are poorly painted and carved. They probably date from the Late Period to the Ptolemaic Period.

**A Kneeling Deity Statuette: Isis or Nephthys (ASM #13204) (Figure 2)**

Provenance: Egypt, provenience unknown  
Material: Wood, probably local Egyptian  
Dimensions: H. 0.201; Max. W. from knee: 0.049; Max. Depth 0.08 m.  
Date of Acquisition: May, 1924, collected in Cairo in the 1920s  
Donor: Miss Lily S. Place  

Similar to # 13203 with some differences in the painted details; the eyes are not heavily painted; there are splotches of red paint on the right hand, left arm and right thigh; the separately-made dowel is secured to the body beneath her buttocks; there is no indication of earrings; the chest protrudes as single mound with individual breasts not indicated; the head is more rounded and the features are smoother; the hands are flat and there is no indication of fingers; on the left eye the eyeball is depicted as a streak of black paint. Nearly intact with well-preserved painted decoration; many chips missing from surface especially from top of head.

This figure appears to be part of a pair with #13203. This kneeling figure refers to either Isis or Nephthys. The remarkable feature of this statue is the falling tear from the left eye as if the artist wanted to stress the mourning role of the goddess as she cries over the deceased. Her role is complementary to her sister Isis who is in mourning and protecting the dead. Nephthys is always portrayed as a woman with her name “nb-Hwt” on her head. Sometimes she is depicted stretching out her wings. Nephthys is associated with funerary concepts; she protects the Canopic jars; and she is associated with Hapi as the guardian of the lungs (Eggebrecht, 1977: 951-952). She appears in the myth of Heliopolis where her role in the Osiris myth is to support her sister Isis. Nephthys became one of the major deities who were protectors of the dead, and along with Isis, she was
one of the four guardian deities of the Canopic jars (Doxey, 2001: 518-519; Wilkinson, 2003: 159-160).

**A Hawk (Horus) Statuette (ASM #A-2988) (Figure 3)**
Provenance: Egypt, provenience unknown
Material: Wood, probably local Egyptian
Dimensions: H. 018.5 cm; Max. Width 0.065; Max. Depth 0.14 m.
Date of Acquisition: October 15, 1942
Collector: David E. Heineman, collected ca. 1900
Donor: R.E.S. Heineman

Statuette of a hawk perched on a base with his tail extended, manufactured from two pieces joined where the lower body meets the legs using a technique of mortise (cut into the body) and a flat rectangular tenon on the upper surface of the feet. On the tenon is evidence of an ancient resin, possibly used as adhesive. In addition, on the bottom of the base is another rectangular tenon, thicker, and used to mount the statuette on whatever rested. Nearly intact with well-preserved painted decoration; many chips missing from surface; a long crack on the wood from the right side. The body has been painted in gray silver (or is the paint white over black which creates a grey appearance?) over a black gesso. Some loss in front where the two pieces join. Surface damage on the right side of the feet. A small square patch of thick white paint (?) adheres to the bottom of the base behind the tenon. The head of the bird is gently curved with a flattish top. There are deep recesses to either side of the beak and widely-spaced, raised circular eyes. The mouth is not delineated; there are no wings or feathers indicated on the tail.

This figure represents the sky god Horus, who was depicted in the form of a hawk or a man with a hawk’s head. Horus has many aspects as a sky god. Here he is shown in his original form as lord of the sky. The hieroglyph word @rw which represents the god’s name means” the distant one” (Meltzer, 2001: 119-122). He is also considered a sun god in the form of Horakhty, “Horus of the two horizons.” He was also a god of kingship, linked directly with the kingship of Egypt (Forman and Quirke, 1996: 180). Horus was worshiped as the son of Isis and Osiris. He was the god who performed the ceremony of opening the mouth for his dead father, Osiris, and by doing so he emphasizes his role as a ruler upon the earthly throne (Shaw and Nicholson, 1995: 133; Leitz, 2002, V: 230, 282-284). The victorious Horus has been referred to as “Horkamoutef,” meaning “the bull of his mother.” This title was a funerary one and was usually given to the elder son of the deceased (Wilkinson, 2003: 200-203; Meltzer, 2001: 119-122). There are numerous examples of this kind of wooden statuette. The ASM statuette may also date to the Late Period (ca. 760–332 BC). This statuette was
used for funerary purposes, and was fixed to a funerary box in a tomb. The tomb owner hoped that he may perform this ceremony for him to be able to be resurrected once again in the hereafter.

**A Statuette of a Nubian Figure (ASM#A-1479) (Figure 4)**

Provenance: Egypt, provenience unknown  
Material: Wood, probably local Egyptian  
Dimensions: H. 0.18; Max. W. from knee: 0.04; Max. Depth 0.053 m.  
Date of Acquisition: September 5, 1940  
Collector: David E. Heineman of New Jersey, collected before 1900  
Donor: R.E.S. Heineman

Small wooden statuette of seated figure, carved in a single piece. Nearly intact with well-preserved painted decoration; many chips missing from surface, especially from lower part of the body. The separately attached arms are missing; and the surface around the arms, especially the right one, is broken. On the right side of the statuette there is a possible ancient repair: a squarish plug used to block a break or hole in the wood. The arms were separately attached with small wooden dowels. The skin of the face, neck, torso and legs is painted red; there are some traces of white gesso on the kilt from waist to below the knees. The figure is wearing a short dark brown wig, small fragments of white gesso on the unpainted part of the wig. The head is round and tilted slightly upward. The eyes are well carved and outlined with black eyeliner; the white in both eyes is very obvious, showing the contrast between the dark skin and the eyes. The triangular nose is wide and flat. The mouth is a barely carved surface. The cheekbones are round and the chin is flat. The neck and torso are elongated; the chest is bare with a flat stomach; a ridge separates the nude torso from the kilt. He wears a white skirt reaching below the knees. The legs carved as one block separated by a groove and the feet are distinguished only by a slight protrusion. Beneath the torso there is a hole with the remains of a small wooden dowel inside. The bottoms of the feet are outlined in black. This statuette probably represents a Nubian figure, to judge from skin color. The ancient Egyptians had dealt with the Nubians since ancient times. Unlike Africans from the innermost parts of Africa, the Nubians were different. They were not isolated from the outside world because of the mountains, desert, and the ocean. Their ancient ancestral home was along the middle Nile, and they were able to communicate with other parts of Africa and the Mediterranean Sea along sea routes. The earliest Egyptian monument from Nubia is a rock inscription from the second cataract which appears to be a record of a campaign by a first dynasty king. From the Fourth Dynasty, under King Khafre, diorite for his statues was being quarried to the west of Toshka and a small settlement that has evidence for
copper mining community in Buhen (Welsby, 2001: 551-557). In the Middle Kingdom military expeditions were sent to guard the Nile in Nubia. Lower Nubia became part of the Egyptian sphere in the New Kingdom, so many Egyptians employees, including priests, were sent to work there (Baines and Malék, 1982: 178-179; Gordon, 2001: 544-548). This statuette probably came from a tomb of an army soldier, and not a general because it is not of high quality. It is hard to give a date for this figure but probably it is the same date as the Horus figure as they were from the same collector David E. Heineman (maybe from the same tomb) so the date could be from the Late Period to the Ptolemaic Period.

A Hand (ASM #A-2989) (Figure 5)
Provenance: Egypt, provenience unknown
Material: Wood, probably local Egyptian
Dimensions: H. 0.22; Max. Width: 0.07; Max. Th. 0.01 m.
Date of Acquisition: October 15, 1942
Collector: David E. Heineman, collected ca. 1900
Donor: R.E.S. Heineman
Nearly intact with well-preserved painted decoration. Many chips missing from upper surface. Remains of black and orange colors above a yellowish-white gesso. The side of the tip is broken off. This is a life-sized right hand with flat and elongated fingers with slight indentations for the nails. There is a hole through the hand above the wrist for attachment. The flat underside (inside of the hand) was left unpainted. This was identified by Dows Dunham (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) as a wooden hand from a mummy case. In our opinion, this wooden hand was part of a wooden statue, and not of a mummy-case or anthropoid coffin. Mummy cases are boxes fitting between the mummy and coffin. Mummy cases were made of cartonnage, a lightweight material made of papyrus waste and linen covered in plaster. The cartonnage material allowed the case to be molded closely with the outline of the mummy, a wonderful material for paint. Mummy cases were elaborately decorated with a variety of religious scenes (Spencer, 1982; Taylor, 1989). We believe the flat unpainted inside of the hand indicates that it was attached to a flat surface and would not have been seen. The hands lay flat beside the body, with the inside of the hands invisible. The unpainted inside of the hands, therefore, makes sense. So the ASM hand could be a hand attached to a statue like that or of a wooden coffin. The ASM hand came from the collector of Horus and the Nubian David E. Heineman, so it could be probably dated from the Late Period to the Ptolemaic Period.
A Fragment of Painted Coffin (ASM #A-2990) (Figure 6)
Provenance: Egypt, provenience unknown
Material: Wood, probably local Egyptian
Dimensions: L. 0.14; Max. Width: 0.035; Max. Th. 0.022 m.
Date of Acquisition: October 15, 1942
Collector: David E. Heineman, collected ca. 1900
Donor: R.E.S. Heineman

This fragmentary wooden piece of a coffin is broken off at the two short ends. The right side is finished and the surface is painted orange, while the finished (?) left side has no painted decoration. The pigments are well preserved with orange, green, black, and red colors over a layer of gesso, with a glaze applied to the surface. The underside is not painted (broken?). A rectangular fragment with painted decoration in registers; the registers are separated by orange bands outlined in red. The decoration in the top register is not clear; the second register from the top has vertical stripes in black, red and green; the glaze has left a messy area over part of the first and second registers. The third register has flanking squares of red and dark green with a light green stripe in the middle. The fourth register has three oval petal shapes in dark green. The bottom preserved register has on a left side a feather symbol in black and green for the ancient Egyptian letter J; above it is the symbol for the mn-sign in red, and a line in black to represent water, and a symbol of a house outlined in black. For this small piece of a coffin, independent dating evidence is of the highest value, as it does not depend on assessments of stylistic features, which may be subject to periodic revision. So the most reliable method of dating is by inscriptions which associate a coffin directly with a particular king or other well-dated historical personage, such as a God’s wife of Amun or high priest (Taylor, 2003: 95-121). As for this piece of coffin it reads “Temple of Amun” so maybe it belongs to one of high priests of Amun during the Late Period which the worship of God Amun reached its peak. There is a short inscription that probably reads, pr Jmn, “Temple of Amun”, perhaps part of the coffin owner’s title.

Conclusion
Although Egypt was not that rich in producing local woods of good quality, the ancient Egyptians tried very hard to overcome this problem by using what nature gave them especially people of low class who used that local wood in producing statuettes, furniture, and coffins. What we have presented here in our article are six wooden pieces of local wood and they are very poorly manufactured which suggests to us that these pieces were local art, or part of a mass production.
References


Figures

Figure 1: A Kneeling Statuette of Isis or Nephthys (ASM #13203)

Photograph by Hend Sherbiny
Figure 2: A Kneeling Deity Statuette: Isis or Nephthys (ASM #13204)

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Figure 3: A Hawk (Horus) Statuette (ASM #A-2988)

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Figure 4: A Statuette of a Nubian Figure (ASM#A-1479)

Photograph by Hend Sherbiny
Figure 5: A Hand (ASM #A-2989)

Photograph by Hend Sherbiny

Figure 6: A Fragment of Painted Coffin (ASM #A-2990)

Photograph by Hend Sherbiny
الملخص العربي

بعض القطع الخشبية المصرية القديمة في متحف ولاية أريزونا

هند الشربينى وحسين عبد البصير

جامعة أريزونا - الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية

الهدف من هذا المقال هو نشر ست قطع خشبية مصرية قديمة موجودة في متحف ولاية أريزونا في جامعة أريزونا في مدينة توسان في ولاية أريزونا في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. وهذه القطع الخشبية هي عبارة عن تماثلين صغيرين جاثين للربتين إيزيس ونفتيس، وتمثال صغير لصقر (لعله للمعبود حورس)، وتمثال صغير لربما لأسير نوبي، ويد، وقطعة من تابوت ملون. ومن المعروف أن الخشب استخدم في مصر القديمة لأغراض مختلفة مثل صناعة التماثيل، والأثاث، والتوابيت، والصناديق الجنائزية. وجاءت الأخشاب المصرية المحلية من أشجار الجميز والسنط النيلي والأثل والخروب ونخيل الدوم ونخيل البلح. وعلى الرغم من أن مصر القديمة لم تكن غنية في إنتاج الأخشاب المحلية ذات النوعية الجيدة، فقد حاول المصريون القدماء قدر استطاعتهم التغلب على تلك المشكلة باستخدام ما أعطتهم الطبيعة. واستخدمت الطبقات الدنيا من المصريين القدماء تحديثا الأخشاب المحلية في إنتاج التماثيل الصغيرة، والأثاث، والتوابيت.

الكلمات الدالة: الخشب المحلي المصري، متحف ولاية أريزونا، إيزيس، نفتيس، حورس، تمثال صغير، نوبي، يد، تابوت