

Ashmolean Object in Focus: Limestone Striding Statue

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Object Factfile

Findspot: Nekhen Town Enclosure, outside north gate

Material: Limestone

Height: 1.37m

Date: about 3000 BC

Museum No.: AN1896–1908 E.3925

Source: Egyptian Research Account 1897–99

This over-life-size statue of a striding man – with an original height estimated at c. 2 metres when complete – is one of the largest surviving examples of Early Dynastic sculpture as well as the earliest occurrence of the striding pose carved in stone. It was discovered by James Quibell in 1897–98 outside the mudbrick enclosure wall of the town of ancient Nekhen. He described it as “of the most archaic and crude type” and immediately compared it to the colossal limestone statues of the fertility god, Min, discovered by Flinders Petrie at Koptos in 1894, two of which are also in the Ashmolean Museum. Analysis of the limestone from which each of these statues is carved, conducted in 1997, suggests they probably all derive from the same quarry, and there are other similarities between them.

The head of the striding man is missing, but a raised area in the centre of the chest suggests the figure originally had a broad beard that tapered to a rounded point. Draped across the body is a close-fitting garment that ends just above the knees. It is composed of a strap that passes over the left shoulder, as indicated by a diagonal band carved in raised relief across the upper back and down the front of the chest. The top of the left shoulder is damaged, so it is not possible to determine if the strap was originally tied in a knot as seen, for example, on garments worn by Narmer on his palette and Scorpion on his mace-head, among others, which seems to have been the fashion of kings and high officials of the time. Traces of a horizontal line across the upper back, just below the armpits, might be part of the same article of clothing or possibly the edge of an outer garment. Just above the knees, the clearly curved lower edge suggests it was wrapped right over left.

Although the left arm is almost completely lost in the extensive damage along the proper left side, traces show that it was bent at the elbow and held diagonally across the front of the chest. The area of the left hand is also damaged, so it is unclear if the hand and arm were fully exposed, perhaps holding the edge of the garment, or concealed below it, as is the case on some of the ivory statuettes from the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit. The surface down the right side is better preserved, with much of the finely worked surface still intact. The remaining tool marks indicate that it was produced by hammering. The right arm, which is bare and disproportionately long, is held vertically down the side of the body. Much like the Koptos colossi, the right hand is clenched in a fist and pierced horizontally to hold a separately made object – possibly a sceptre or a mace of a different material – perhaps indicating the figure’s high status. Most of the modelling on the fist is lost, but the tip of the extended thumb is still well preserved.

The torso is relatively thin compared to the massive upper legs, and it has been suggested that this was to ensure the stability of the statue at a time when carving in stone was still in its infancy. The striding pose shows the left leg advanced, but the space between the legs was not carved through. The lower legs are missing but the knees survive. These are well modelled in relief and stand in contrast to the schematic rendering on the Min colossi where the kneecaps are shown as pairs of isosceles triangles.

The statue was found lying on its side within a row of three stones outside the town enclosure wall near the northern gateway. Quibell assumed it had been moved there from the

temple enclosure during a later period of renovation, possibly in the New Kingdom, when this and other archaic objects had presumably lost their sanctity and were broken up or reused as building material. A series of shallow circular depressions have been ground along the left side of the figure and Quibell suggested these were the result of its later re-use as a door socket. However, there are certainly too many recesses (16 are present) to support this interpretation. Instead, they probably represent the actions of later pilgrims grinding away at the surface of the statue to collect powder thought to possess potent magical properties. Similar depressions can also be seen on the Min colossi, marking another striking parallel between them.

Many of the male statuettes carved in ivory from the Main Deposit are depicted in a similar pose with the left leg advanced and the left arm bent across the chest. One even wears a comparable knee-length garment, albeit with a large knot tied on top of the right shoulder leaving the left shoulder bare. This example also has a close parallel in one of the miniature ivory figurines discovered at Tell el-Farkha in the Nile Delta (see cover of *Nekhen News* 31), suggesting that the form had widespread significance despite differences in scale and material.

The identity of the statue is ultimately unknown, although its considerable size and active pose, together with the attached regalia and costume, suggest it represents a high-ranking official, most likely a priest or a king. If the proposal that it was originally set up somewhere within the royal enclosure is correct, then the presence of other sculptures – including the kneeling figures discussed on pages 22–24, the limestone and siltstone statues of King Khasekhem (see *Nekhen News* 29: 25–26 and page 27) and the ivory statuettes from the Main Deposit (see *Nekhen News* 31: 15–17) – suggests that the precinct was originally adorned with an array of statuary in different sizes and materials, all of which must have served to portray and enhance the power and dominion of Egypt's early kings.