

The Ivory Statuette from HK6 Tomb 72

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Arguably the most significant object discovered in Tomb 72 is the ivory statuette of a standing male figure, found in the north-west corner of the grave. The statuette is 32cm tall and carved from a single hippopotamus incisor, one of two large, straight tusks from the animal's lower jaw that can grow up to 40cm in length and 5–6cm in diameter. The size of the figure suggests that the raw material came from a particularly large animal.

Very little of the original finished surface is preserved, but the quality of the carving is indisputable. A deep hole in the top of the head (the remains of the tusk's tapering pulp cavity) was perhaps originally used for attaching separately modelled headgear or hair. The figure's well-modelled ears are very large and protrude from the sides of the head. The aquiline nose is also disproportionately large, and this apparent emphasis upon the extremities of the face may relate to the statuette's intended (but ultimately unknown) function. Scant traces show that the almond-shaped eyes and arching eyebrows were originally modelled in raised relief. Below the slightly protruding mouth, the figure wears a short pointed beard, with the chin-strap still visible in places along the jawline. These facial features strongly resemble the pottery masks known from the cemetery at HK6, and it has been suggested that the statuette and the masks might depict the same entity.

The figure has a broad neck but weak shoulders. The right arm appears as a pointed stump; the broken surface on the left might suggest that the arms originally extended down the sides of the body, carved free, or with the hands placed on the sides of the upper legs. Alternatively, the arms may have been abbreviated, with features that were not essential to the statuette's function deliberately reduced in order to prevent damage.

The figure is naked except for a simple penis sheath which projects from the abdomen, but no indication of a belt or girdle survives. The figure has broad hips and wide buttocks. The space between the legs is carved through, so that the legs were originally separated, but the gap was left filled with earth pending final conservation. The legs are slightly bent at the knees and end in short projections for the feet, with incised vertical lines across the front perhaps representing the toes. It is unlikely that the statuette was intended to stand without support: the head is large and the feet are small, so the piece is rather top-heavy. The shape of the feet rather suggests that they were originally slotted into a base, although no trace of this element was found in the grave.

Comparable examples of human sculpture from the Predynastic period are extremely rare, particularly from excavated contexts, making the Hierakonpolis statuette one of the most securely dated and well-provenanced objects of this type ever found in Egypt. The closest parallel was found in Tomb H29 at Mahasna, near Abydos, in 1911. It is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. This ivory statuette is 34cm tall; his arms extended down the sides of his body, but the hands are not indicated. The schematically rendered head is bald, with eyes made of small cylindrical blue glazed steatite beads. The mouth is an incised slit. However, like the Tomb 72 statue, the ears are large and protruding, the nose prominently modelled and the chin covered with a broad beard.

The Cairo statuette is closely paralleled by several unprovenanced examples in ivory as well as others in different materials including the two golden statuettes found at Tell el-Farkha in 2006, and the controversial stone statue known as 'MacGregor Man' in the Ashmolean Museum, who also wears a long, pointed beard.

Later parallels for these early statuettes come from the 'Main Deposit' excavated in the temple enclosure at Hierakonpolis in 1897–99. This spectacular cache of objects, which included some of the most iconic works of early Egyptian art (such as the Scorpion and Narmer mace-heads, to name just a few), also contained hundreds of fragments of human statuettes, ranging

from almost complete examples, to the detached heads, arms, legs, feet and bases of others. The majority of the ivories were sent to the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford (over 700 pieces) with others now in the Petrie Museum, Cairo and Philadelphia. Many of the male statuettes have a short pointed beard, and some examples wear an elaborate penis sheath suspended from a belt around the waist. Other statuettes in the group include women with bouffant wigs; figures wrapped in elaborate cloaks; children crouching with their fingers in their mouths; male and female dwarves; and bound prisoners. It has been suggested that these objects represent discarded votive objects from the early temple dating to the late Predynastic–Early Dynastic period, although this remains a subject of considerable debate. It is possible that the ‘Main Deposit’ statuettes depict members of the king’s court, whose images were set up in a royal precinct where rituals of kingship were performed before they were gathered together and ritually deposited at a later time.

Who does the new Hierakonpolis statuette represent? A god or a spirit; an early ruler; the tomb owner; a member of his family or court; a friend or foe? Why was it deposited in the tomb? As a representation of the deceased; to act on his behalf in the afterlife; as part of the funerary rituals performed at the time of the burial; to protect the deceased against attacks from enemies? Interpreting the function of such early statuettes is extremely speculative. In later periods of ancient Egyptian history, statues could function in various ways: as a representation of a god (a cult statue), or as a receptacle for the spirit of the deceased (a tomb statue); they could provide a means of communication between the living and the deceased (an ancestor bust), perform activities that were necessary for the sustenance of the deceased in the next life (a servant statue), or possess magical powers connected with a specific ritual (fertility figurines, etc).

The inclusion of statuettes among Predynastic grave goods was not typical, so the figures may have been associated with a particular person or role in society, or else they could have served a purpose that only a few individuals desired or expressed. The later examples from the Hierakonpolis ‘Main Deposit’ and other sites seem to suggest a shift in original setting — from tomb to ‘temple’ — and this may also indicate a change in practice or belief. At the very least, the discovery of the statuette in Tomb 72 demonstrates that the tradition of fine ivory carving at Hierakonpolis can be traced back to the early Naqada II period. Further investigation of these rare early representations of human beings promises to tell us more about the inhabitants of Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt, their hopes, fears, desires and beliefs. The new statuette from Hierakonpolis is therefore a most valuable addition to the corpus.