

Unpublished *b3*- Figurines in the Egyptian Museum at Cairo

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Abstract

b3 bird statuettes, figurines, and amulets are funerary objects that is commonly found in Egyptian museums. *b3* -figurines started to be common among funerary objects found in ancient Egyptian tombs since the New Kingdom. Unlike *b3* statuettes, *b3* figurines were intended to be attached to a coffin or a stela in many cases. Their existence increased in the Late and Ptolemaic Periods. This present paper is dealing with seven unpublished *b3*-bird figurines at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo. They were discovered by the Austrian Archaeological Institute in 1969 at El-Asassif, Thebes and since that they were not published before.

Keywords

b3- figurines, figurine, funerary object, bird.

Introduction

b3 bird statuettes and figurines¹ are common in ancient Egyptian antiquity. The current paper is dealing with identifying unpublished *b3* figurines (JE/94594, JE/94380, JE/94546, JE/94547, JE/94549, JE/94531, JE/94450) recovered from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, dates back to the Late period.

Ancient Egyptians contemplated the soul of the deceased and referred to it by the term *b3*². It is usually shown as the disguise of a bird (some alleged to be African Jabiru or Saddlebill Stork^{3,4})

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¹ Avian humanoids depictions (people “regardless gender or age” with the features of birds) are a common motif in ancient cultures which was extensively used in classical antiquity; The neighboring countries had shown several aspects, see J. YARNALL, « Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress », Chicago, 1994, p. 28; according to her, these kinds of motifs were familiar in ancient art from the east Mediterranean civilizations (Mycenae, Crete, Egypt, etc.); H.A. MODE, *Fabulous Beasts and Demons*, New York, 1975, p. 101 – 102, he noted that these hybrids had been used extensively in both ancient cultures (Mesopotamia and Egypt).

² S.G.F. BRANDON AND D. MILLER, *Beliefs, Rituals, and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Fertile Crescent (Man, Myth, and Magic)*, New York, 2014, p. 34.

³ Saddlebill stork (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*) is a bird originated from Africa and resides today all over sub-Saharan Africa; See also, J. Hancock, J.A. Kushlan and M.P. Kahl, *Storks, Ibises and Spoonbills of the World*, London, 1992, p. 116.

⁴ L. BAQUÉ-MANZANO, « Further Arguments on the Coptos Colossi », *BIFAO* 102, 2002, p. 34; also, can be hieroglyphically written in the same manner as the birds.

or as a bird (hawk, falcon, later on other types) with a human head⁵, deceased male or female⁶ according to the headdress to correlate the gender⁷.

Ancient Egyptians believed that the *bꜣ* as the essence of a person.⁸ Motte, had emphasized the meaning of it as the divine animating principle or psychic power in the mortal body. He added that this kind of force is entering the body at birth and leaving it at the end of one's earthly existence⁹.

The main function of *bꜣ* bird statuettes and figurines within the funerary artifacts (resurrection aspect) is probably to allow the deceased soul to soar upward to visit the world of the living, or ascend to the sky to travel with the sun god¹⁰ (Re). Over and above, the soul must come back during the night to the *kꜣ* of the deceased (reuniting with it¹¹) inside the tomb in order to rejuvenate itself from the *kꜣ* energy¹². As a consequence, there were small holes undertook in the burial chamber (inside the tomb) to allow the free movement of the *bꜣ*.

bꜣ depends on the physical body for its own existence, and the human body regarded as a guarantee for the resurrection of the deceased. Nevertheless, the *bꜣ* had the same physical needs of food, drink and sexual activity¹³ as the living person¹⁴. Meskell and Joyce had a great interpretation for the *bꜣ* which is a freely moving agent¹⁵, representing the person, linking between the earthly world, heaven and the afterworld¹⁶.

Moreover, the *bꜣ* concept acted as the notion of strength that point to the capacity to incarnate several forms (hawk, snake, crocodile, etc.)¹⁷.

⁵ H.T. VELDE, « Some Remarks on the Concept 'Person' in the Ancient Egyptian Culture », in H.G. KIPPENBERG, Y. KUIPER, A.F. SANDERS (eds.), *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, Religion and Reason 37, Method and Theory in the Study and Interpretation of Religion, Berlin, 1990, p. 92.

⁶ J.D. COONEY, « Siren and Ba, Birds of a Feather », *BCMA* 55, No. 8, 1968, p. 267.

⁷ CHR. RIGGS AND M.A. STADLER, « A Roman Shroud and its Demotic Inscriptions in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston », *JEA* 40, 2003, p. 79.

⁸ E. MEYER-DIETRICH, *Senebi und Selbst: Personenkonstituenten zur rituellen Wiedergeburt in einem Frauensarg des Mittleren Reiches*, Fribourg, 2006, p. 1.

⁹ E. DE MOTTE, *Egyptian Religion and Mysteries*, Xlibris Corporation, 2013, p. 79.

¹⁰ P.S. MACDONALD, *History of the Concept of Mind: The Heterodox and Occult Tradition*, Vol. II, New York, 2007, p. 14 - 15.

¹¹ Z. HAWASS, *The Valley Of The Golden Mummies*, Cairo, 2000, p. 142.

¹² E.L ABEL, *Death Gods: An Encyclopedia of the Rulers, Evil Spirits, and Geographies of the Dead*, Connecticut, 2009, p. 31.

¹³ S.-A. NAGUIB, « Exploring Biographies. Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes at the University Museum of Cultural History in Oslo », *CLARA* 3, 2018, p. 4.

¹⁴ E. HORNUNG, *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, New York, 1992, p. 181.

¹⁵ P. BARGUET, *Le Livre des morts des anciens Égyptiens*, Paris, 1967, p. 72.

¹⁶ L.M. MESKELL AND R.A. JOYCE, *Embodied Lives: Figuring Ancient Maya and Egyptian Experience*. London, 2003, p. 69.

¹⁷ B. JANOWSKI, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, Translated by: A. SIEDLECKI, Kentucky, 2013, p. 244, n. 146.

Bird figurines were usually shown as a hawk figure with a human head of the deceased¹⁸, shown sometimes with human hands and arms as well¹⁹.

To comprehend the dilemma, the *bꜣ* could detach itself from the physical body, wag about freely and take any form it desired. While the *kꜣ* referred to the interior communication of the person with him/herself, the *bꜣ* served as a factor for connection between the dead person and the outer world²⁰.

The usage of the *bꜣ* within the funerary domain starts from the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, and was attributed to non-royal people without emblematic depiction²¹. Also, had been inscribed on texts (coffin texts specifically)²².

From the New Kingdom onwards, the idea of producing of funerary objects had been extensively noticed.

The *bꜣ* statuettes or figurines could have been frugally left freestanding within the tomb or jointed to a stela by a wooden wedge “Fig. 2²³”, a hole for which is preserved in the base of the statuette or figurine²⁴.

Description

Fig. 1: It is made out of painted wood. The *bꜣ* is shown as bird with human head standing over a rectangular base. It is shown wearing a tripartite hair-wig, with three lappets, leaving his two ears exposed. It is blue in color. There is a representation of turned up beard, the paint of which is missing. The eyes are outlined in black while the nose and the mouth bearing traces of reddish brown. The feathers are depicted in green, black, red and brown paint. The claws are represented in reddish brown paint. Over the chest of the bird, there is an *ib*-amulet. The function of this amulet is probably to identify the deceased with the new born sun which assures resurrection. It was also intended to reflect the high rank of individuals.²⁵ There is another figurine²⁶ that is almost identical with this one in Kunsthistorisches museum. There is a hole beneath base which proposes that this figurine probably was attached to a funerary object.

¹⁸ L. TÖRÖK, *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region Between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC - 500 AD*, Leiden, 2009, p. 423.

¹⁹ J.H. TAYLOR, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, London, 2001, p. 21.

²⁰ J. ASSMANN, « Harfenlied und Horussöhne », *JEG. Arch.* 65, 1979, p. 71; H.T. VELDE, *op. cit.*, 1990, p. 92.

²¹ L. ŽABKAR, “A study of the ba concept in ancient Egyptian texts”, in *SAOC* 34, Chicago 1968, p. 162.

²² H. SCHWARZ, *Eschatology*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 33.

²³ Funerary Stela, EA 8468, British Museum in London, Ptolemaic Period.

²⁴ F. SCALF, « Ba-Bird Statuette », In R. BAILLEUL-LESUER (ed.), *Between Heaven and Earth: Birds in Ancient Egypt*, *OIP* 35, Chicago, 2012, p. 202.

²⁵ R. SOUSA, *Heart of Wisdom: Studies on the Heart Amulet in Ancient Egypt*, in *BAR* 2211, Oxford, 2011, p. 85.

²⁶ R. H., ELFRIEDE, and H. SATZINGER: *Funde aus Ägypten. Österreichische Ausgrabungen seit 1961*, Wien, 1979, 108, M13.

It was discovered by the Austrian Archaeological Institute in 1969. It is coming from the transverse hall of tomb I.27

Fig. 2: Wooden human headed bird *b3*-figurine standing over a rectangular base. It is covered with stucco and carries yellowish paint for the whole body. The tripartite hair-wig and wings are colored in blue. There are red dots over the chest while the eye brows and eyes are carries black paint. The legs are decorated with black vertical lines as an imitation of feathers. The claws are shown in reddish brown. The mouth carries red paint and represented with slight smile. The two ears are exposed. There is a hole beneath the base with a tang (partly damaged) that suggests that it was attached to another object.

Fig. 3: Wooden *b3*-figurine painted in yellow, red and green. The rough quality of sculpture indicates that it would belong to a provincial workshop. The hole over the head suggests the attachment of sun disc over it. The tang beneath the base alludes that it was attached to another funerary object. The facial features are executed in a rough way and they are not clear.

Fig. 4: wooden *b3*-figurine carries traces of white paint. There is a tripartite hair-wig over its head. Traces of beard are hardly visible. It is shown standing over a rectangular base which is deposited over a wooden like sledge base.

Fig. 5: wooden *b3* figurine standing over a rectangular base. Traces of white, blue, black colors are visible. There is a tripartite hair-wig shown over its head with traces of blue paint. The hole over its forehead probably suggests the existence of uraeus (?) which is missing nowadays. Accordingly, it would be assumed that this figurine belongs to a royal person. It is also shown with a beard.

Fig. 6: female *b3*-figurine portrayed over a rectangular base. It bears only traces of blue paint. It wears a tripartite hair-wig. The sun disc over its head probably was gilded according to the tradition of producing these figurines. The tang beneath the base assumes that it was attached to another object.

Fig. 7: female *b3*-figurine represented over a partly broken rectangular base. The lower part of its legs is missing. It carries traces of blue, white, green, red, and black paint. It is shown wearing a tripartite hair-wig with traces of blue paint.

Commentary and Conclusions

b3-figurines discussed in this research dates back to the Late Period, which is an era in which these funerary objects owned a high concern. They were discovered at El-Asasif, Thebes by the Austrian Archaeological Institute. They are made out of painted wood. The poor and rough body carving indicate their mass production. Their case does not reflect the skillful production of craftsmen. The colors of *b3*-figurines vary from one to another. As for their function, they were probably functioned as decorative elements for funerary objects of burial assemblages developed since the Third Intermediate Period onwards

²⁷ J. Budka, Bestattungsbrauchtum und Friedhofsstruktur im Asasif. Eine Untersuchung der spätzeitlichen Befunde anhand der Ergebnisse der österreichischen Ausgrabungen in den Jahren 1969–1977 Bestattungsbrauchtum und Friedhofsstruktur im Asasif. Eine Untersuchung der spätzeitlichen Befunde anhand der Ergebnisse der österreichischen Ausgrabungen in den Jahren 1969–1977, Wien, 2010, p. 259-260, fig. 115.

For instance, being attached to a vaulted top of a funerary stela (fig.8), or a Ptah-Sokar-Osiris statuettes, mummy cartonnages, standards, and shrines.²⁸

Finally, Aston suggests that they were usually associated with the corner posts of *qrsw*-coffins.²⁹

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²⁸ E. CASINI: «The Three -Dimensional Representations of the Human-Headed *bꜣ*-Bird: Some Remarks about their Origin and Function», *EVO* XXXVIII, 2015 p. 26.

²⁹ D. A. Aston, *Burial assemblages of Dynasty 21-25, Chronology-Typology-Developments*, Wien, 2009, p. 161, 389.

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Table 1

	Number	Material	Dimensions	Provenance	Date
1	JE/94594 SR4/15767	Painted wood	Height 9.6cm Length/Depth 9.8 cm	Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period
2	JE/94380 SR4/15800	Painted wood		Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period
3	JE/94546 SR4/15787	Painted wood	Height 4.8cm Length/Depth 5.8 cm	Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period
4	JE/94549 SR4/15790	Painted wood	Height 10.3cm Length/Depth 8 cm	Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period

5	JE/94547 SR4/15788	Painted wood	Height 9.65cm Length/Depth 8.2 cm	Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period
6	JE/94531 SR4/15784	Painted wood	Height 10.3cm Length/Depth 4.4 cm	Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period
7	JE/94450 SR4/15791	Painted wood	Height 8.55cm Length/Depth 6.67 cm	Thebes (Asassif)	Late Period

b3 figurines at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo

Figures

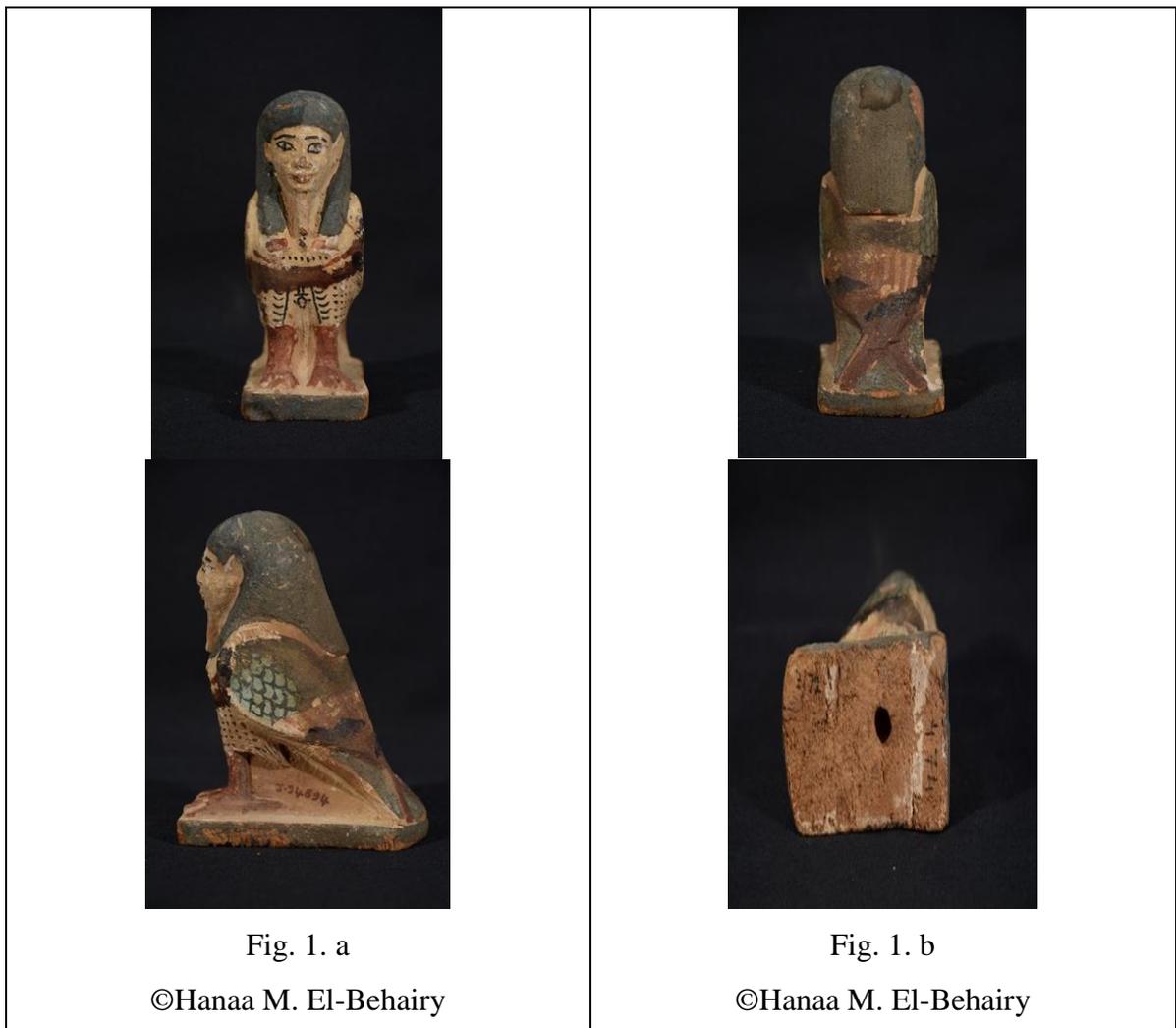




Fig. 2. a

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Fig. 2. a

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Fig. 3. a
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Fig. 3. b
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Fig. 4. a

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Fig. 4. b

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Fig. 5. a

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Fig. 5. b

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Fig. 6. a

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Fig. 6. b

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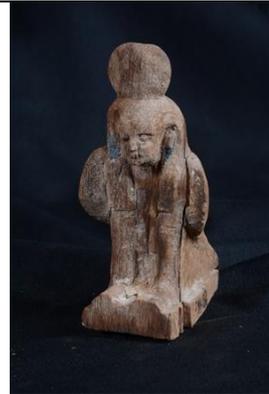




Fig. 7. a

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Fig. 7. b

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Sycamore wood Stela of Neswy, Ptolemaic Period (EA8468), British Museum

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