

‘THE PERFECTION THAT ENDURES...’

STUDIES ON OLD KINGDOM
ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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*The participants in front of the Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, July 2014.
(phot. Kamila Braulińska)*

OLD KINGDOM WOODEN STATUES AND BEYOND

Julia Harvey

Abstract

Many previously unknown Old Kingdom wooden statues are surfacing on the market and in museums. The corpus of Old Kingdom wooden statues published in 1994 is still valid for dating these statues.

In 2004, the commercial edition of my 1994 thesis on Old Kingdom wooden statues¹ was published, so 2014 marked two decennial anniversaries of that research. It was nice to be able to ascertain that the theories and guidelines presented in that work have stood the test of time, thus providing a handy way of dating wooden statues. A huge corpus of Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom statues is still awaiting processing, and it is nice to know that the system developed for the Old Kingdom can be extended to them.

In the meantime, many 'new' Old Kingdom statues have emerged – from a variety of sources. Excavations are no longer the main source, partly because most of the major sites have been well and truly excavated already, and partly because of the changes in the climate. Exceptions to the former instance include the current Belgian excavations at Deir el-Bersheh, as well as various excavations at Saqqara. With regard to the latter, Lake Nasser for example has raised the groundwater levels, which in turn means a much moister environment and thus much less chance of wooden objects surviving intact. The main source is thus statues appearing on the art market. It seems that the third or fourth generation after the collector is no longer interested in keeping the family collection intact, and many previously unknown statues are appearing for sale. At least 20 statues have appeared in the last 5 years alone, and probably many more have changed hands without any public record appearing.

Another interesting source is the new acquisitions by museums – which is of course closely related to the art market source. In this case the purchases do appear on public display – one example is the Egyptian Museum in Barcelona, which in the last 10 years or so has acquired nearly 20 wooden statues, of mixed provenance and credibility. I am delighted that the Museum has granted me permission to research and publish their wooden statues and hope to be able to work on them in the course of 2015.

Requests for expertise have also led to many new additions to the corpus. Private collectors and auction houses are finding their way more and more often to my e-mail address, mainly due to recommendations from museum curators who know of my specialization. Unfortunately, many statues are subsequently sold to collectors who do not wish to have contact with a specialist, and are thus vanishing from the archives for an unknown length of time. I greatly appreciate the initial contacts, however, which enable me to add the statues to the overall list of extant ones, even though their current location remains unknown.

¹ HARVEY 2001.

The presentation ended with a general appeal to all those present to pass the word to me about any wooden statues they may come across – Old, Middle, New Kingdom and later, all are welcome additions to the corpora.

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