

A rib to curse

Taxonomic re-evaluation of the Coptic Magical Bone from Gebel Asyut al-gharbi (S05/46)

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Introduction

A Coptic text written on a rib of a large mammal, a so-called ‘Magical Bone’ (figs. 1 and 2), was discovered at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi in 2005 during fieldwork for *The Asyut Project*, a joint German-Egyptian project. Two parallels, namely two ribs of large mammal(s) covered in hand-writing clearly related to the writings found on the rib from Gebel Asyut al-gharbi¹, are known and housed at the *Instituto di Papirologia dell’Università degli Studi* in Milan (Os.Mil.Vogl. inv. 1) and the *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden* in Leiden (F 1965/8.5)². It is currently assumed that both objects originate from Akhmim, although this is not known with certainty.³

A study concerning the Magical Bone from Gebel Asyut al-gharbi was first published by Kahl⁴, including a general description of the object and the most likely animal species it belonged to. Recently, another publication by Dosoo⁵ dated the bone to the ninth or tenth century CE and included an attempt to further discuss the species of the animal involved. In the present paper, the author would like to re-evaluate and discuss the taxonomic status of the raw material used for the Coptic Magical Bone from Gebel Asyut al-gharbi.

¹ Dosoo 2021, 169.

² Dosoo 2021, 168–169, fig. 1; Drescher 1948, 267–276; Kahl 2016, 332; Trismegistos Texts TM 874161.

³ Dosoo 2021, 169; Drescher 1948, 267–277; Kahl 2016, 333; Meyer and Smith 1999, 204–206.

⁴ Kahl 2007, 71, pl. 2c; Kahl 2016, 333–337, pl. 4.

⁵ Dosoo 2021.

Review and re-evaluation of the species used as raw material for the Magical Bone from Asyut

The Coptic Magical Bone (number: S05/46) was found in Shaft 4 of Tomb III during the fieldwork season of 2005. Shaft 4 remained unnoticed in early Egyptology and seems to have been untouched since the Mamluk Period.⁶ Tomb III was originally built for Iti-ibi, a nomarch of the First Intermediate Period and has been reused since then in different ways, e. g. as tombs/burial ground for later burials, as hermitage for Coptic anchorites, as a quarry and as a study room for archaeological excavations. The Coptic text on the Magical Bone in question is written in red ink on a rib of a large mammal and starts with the invocation of a demon and curses directed at a certain person.⁷ While the name of the person cursed is not preserved on this particular object, the curses on a pair of similar objects (mentioned above and below) were both directed at the same person named Harōn, son of Tkouikira.⁸

The size of the Magical Bone from Asyut is approximately 380–390 mm in length, measured in a straight line from one end to the other (one end broken off), a maximum of 50.5 mm in breadth from the anterior to the posterior border and a maximum of 10.3 mm in thickness at the *corpus costae*.

Concerning the raw material used, the animal species and part involved, the author identified it as a rib of a large bovid, most probably cattle *Bos taurus*, during her on-site examination in 2008.⁹ Since Drescher identified the raw material used for the other two parallel objects mentioned above to be camel bones in his publication¹⁰ and Dosoo pointed out that “it is not possible at present to be certain whether this was a bovine, camelid, or even equine”¹¹, the Magical Bone from Asyut was re-examined at the magazine in Shutb where it is stored.

A thorough re-examination of the object including 2D/3D photographs was carried out on-site in September 2022 and the resulting images were compared with specimens of cattle, horse and camel at the *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin* in November 2022. Based on osteomorphological comparisons, the possibility that the Asyut rib belonged to a horse (equid) could be ruled out. Concerning the question whether it originally belonged to cattle or a camel, similarities in the respective morphologies undeniably make a definite identification difficult. However, based on observed differences in osteomorphology in the area of the *sulcus costae* and differences in the outer (i.e. lateral) part of the *corpus costae* between the two species, the raw material used for the Magical Bone from Asyut most probably was the seventh rib on the right side of cattle. First of all, the well-defined ridge of the *sulcus costae* on the inner (i.e. medial) surface of the rib extends longer toward the ventral direction in cattle while it is comparatively shorter and it turns into an indistinct line in camels. Moreover, a direct comparison of the *corpus costae* on the outer (i.e. lateral) sides indicates that it is more raised in camel specimen than in cattle. Since it is rather

⁶ Kahl 2016, xvi–xvii, 333.

⁷ Kahl 2016, 333.

⁸ Dosoo 2021, 169, 174; for further details of the texts, see Dosoo 2021 and Kahl 2016.

⁹ See Kahl 2016, 333.

¹⁰ Drescher 1948, 268.

¹¹ Dosoo 2021, 171–172.



Fig. 1: Coptic Magical Bone from Gebel Asyut al-gharbi (S05/46): outer (i. e, lateral) side © Jochem Kahl, The Asyut Project.



Fig. 2: Coptic Magical Bone from Gebel Asyut al-gharbi (S05/46): inner (i. e, medial) side © Colline Brassard, The Asyut Project.

flat in the Magical Bone from Asyut, interpretation as a cattle rib appears to be the most sensible conclusion even though, strictly speaking, some other large bovid cannot be completely ruled out as the source.

Conclusion

The Magical Bone unearthed from Shaft 4 in Tomb III at Gebel-Asyut al-gharbi could be identified as a cattle rib. There are two other cases of similar Magical Bones from Akhmim (?), and all three specimens seem to have been inscribed by the same person.¹² It is important to point out that the site of discovery has been ascertained through archaeological fieldwork only for the Magical Bone from Asyut.

Some questions still remain: was the number ‘seven’ a mere coincidence or was it chosen deliberately? Is it an excessive assumption to wonder if the ‘seventh’ rib happens to correspond to the ancient idea of the six powers of death and their master?¹³ The two other Magical Bones mentioned throughout this paper bear curses directed at the same person and most probably the curses on the Asyut specimen target the same person as well. It seems unlikely that the creator of the Magical Bones, which were imbued with the client’s grudges, chose the raw materials at random. The red letters are believed to evoke blood.¹⁴ Where were those curses originally inscribed? Were they finished in Asyut or written elsewhere and later brought to the locations they were placed in? Did the three ribs belong to different animal species?

Identification of the correct animal species based on just a few photographs of corresponding ribs is indeed difficult and any definite answer would require a direct examination of the physical remains. Therefore, the author will refrain from making comments on the question from which kind of animal the other two bones appear to be. This is an issue for future research.

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¹² Dosoo 2021, 171.

¹³ See Dosoo 2021, 173–175; Kahl 2016, 333.

¹⁴ Dosoo 2021, 171; Drescher 1948, 274; Kahl 2016, 333; Richter 2015, 88.

the author an opportunity to visit the collection to study specimens for comparisons. *The Asyut Project* has been funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (until 31.12.2019), and *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft & Narodowe Centrum Nauki* (BEETHOVEN Classic 3, since 01.01.2020).

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