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## The gold handle of a fishtail dagger from Gebelein (Upper Egypt)

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Abstract. The gold handle of a fishtail dagger from Gebelein (Upper Egypt) is described. The handle is made of gold and is decorated with engravings of a boat and three women. The handle is fastened to the flint blade with three rivets. The handle is 30 cm long.

In 1900, at Qena, J. E. Quibell purchased a set of predynastic objects for the Cairo Museum. The dealer<sup>1</sup> insisted that he had bought them from a peasant living in the vicinity of Gebelein. Among other items, the set included a flint fishtail dagger with a gold handle<sup>2</sup> (Cairo, Egyptian Museum 34210). It was published by Quibell a year later (Quibell 1901).

The dagger (Fig. 1) is the most peculiar object in the set. The handle consists of a downward broadening shank, whose crooked tips enfold a flint blade, to which it is fastened with three rivets. The decoration engraved on both sides of it is similar to patterns painted on Decorated pottery. On one side (Fig. 2), there is a boat with two cabins, an animal standing on the front cabin and a standard placed on the back cabin, as well as a motif usually described as a "tree" (e.g., Keimer 1934 : 189 - 190). On the opposite side three women standing one by another, also on a boat, are engraved. One of the women handles a fan-shaped object. The oars of the two boats are engraved on the upper edge of the handle.

Already Quibell (1901) had made a mention of the possible inauthenticity of the handle; it seemed strange to him that its two parts were soldered and that the handle was fastened to the flint blade with rivets. Yet, despite that, he apparently believed it to be authentic.

For many years to come, the handle was regarded as a close analogy of patterns painted on Decorated pottery (Capart 1905 : 69; Newberry 1913 : 136; Vandier 1952 : 549). Baumgartel (1960 : 5 - 6) was first to point out the few peculiarities of its decoration. According to her, the most strange features include the snake-like bend of one of the women's hand, the form of a fan-shaped object held by this woman which seems to be a transformation of another motif known from Decorated pottery,

<sup>1</sup> According to the *Journal d'entrée* his name was Girgis.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal d'entrée* No. 34210, *Catalogue Général* (Curelly 1913: 272, Pl. XLVII), No. 64868, length 30 cm.



FIG. 1. Gebelein. Fishtail dagger with a gold handle

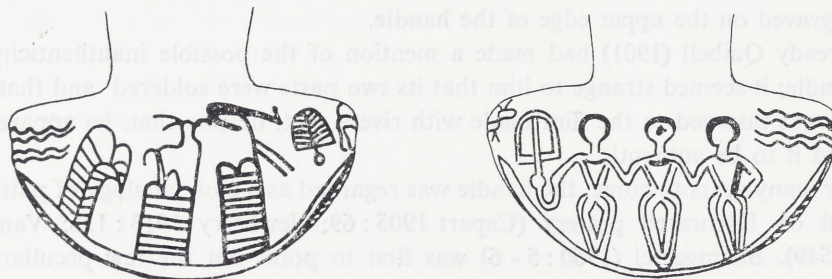


FIG. 2. Gebelein. Decoration of the dagger handle

the so-called "tree", and an unprecedented outline of the three women's silhouettes — a parallel line runs along the contour from within. She also pointed out the odd appearance of the animal standing on the cabin of the boat. It hardly has any legs at all; instead, three horns are visible on its head.

A few other peculiarities of the decoration may be added to Baumgartel's description: a "double" prow decoration, with no formal analogy elsewhere, a markedly higher back cabin of the boat, and distorted proportions of the three women's silhouettes. A similar group occurs on a vessel formerly in the MacGregor Collection (MacGregor 1922: No. 1754, Pl. LIII)<sup>3</sup> and on a famous Decorated vessel in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (e.g. Baumgartel 1960: Pl. XIII: 1-3). The differences are easy to detect. There, the women's heads are much larger, their necks are shorter, their linked arms appear to reach their waists rather than to end halfway their torsos. The women's silhouettes represented on the handle are strikingly schematic: the geometric precision with which their linked arms are depicted is particularly noteworthy; additionally, their hips are too round and their legs too short in comparison with their torsos. The "fan" is disproportionately big, almost twice the size of the woman's head. On the vessel from the MacGregor Collection, one of the women also handles an object that might be a fan. Yet it is relatively smaller and the method of depiction is different: radial crosspieces can be seen within, and the hand by which the object is handled is bent at an acute angle.

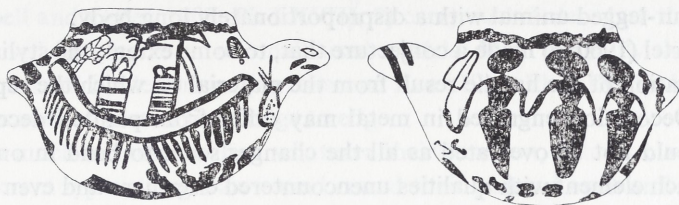


FIG. 3. Decorated vessel from the MacGregor collection, now in a private Swiss collection

A private Swiss collection also includes a bird-shaped vessel (Fig. 3), formerly in the MacGregor Collection, too (MacGregor 1922: No. 1756; 5000 Jahre 1961: No. 12; Schlögl 1978: 20, Pl. 16a, b)<sup>4</sup>, with a decoration almost identical with that on the handle in question. There, the preserved features include the apparent oddities of the handle: the unnatural bend of the hand of the woman holding a fan and the somewhat higher back cabin. The decoration is somewhat coarse and awkward, yet with more traits of authenticity than in the case of the handle. The prow decoration of the boat corresponds to forms known from other relics and the animal depicted on the front cabin can be easily identified.

<sup>3</sup> This is the only example I know of red on buff decoration on a vessel of this shape. This is a usual form of stone vessels and their imitations (cf. von Bissing 1913: 45, Nos. 2145, 2146, Pl. II).

<sup>4</sup> Schlögl's (1978: 20) analogy of the shape of the vessel (Petrie 1920: Pl. XXIV: 12) is probably the result of a misprint as the vessel is fish-shaped. The other specimen published by Petrie (1920: Pl. XXV: 5) is rather an analogue of the Basel vessel. Cf. Murray 1911: 43, Nos. 28, 29, Pl. XXIII: 28 - 29.

What is more important, however, is that the decoration present on the two relics is almost identical. Although at the first glance scenes painted on Decorated pottery may seem uniform and monotonous, no two vessels of this type have figural representations with identical elements as is the case here. The repertory of individual decorative elements and their layout are never repeated, whereas, on examination of the vessel and the handle, one may gather an impression that the vessel was not unknown to the maker of the decoration of the handle. The pattern seems "calqued", especially every stroke of the standard runs exactly the same way on both objects.

Moreover, all the slightly odd features of the decoration of the vessel are grossly exaggerated on the handle: the somewhat blurred prow decoration is split into two and presented as if with a knowledge of the rules of perspective, the thick undulating lines above the bird's tail are transformed into four strikingly regular waves, and the bend of the hand with a fan, which, though odd on the vessel, might have resulted from a wish to depict a strange gesture, is quite unnatural on the handle. On the vessel, the rear cabin of the boat seems higher mainly because the crosspieces are packed more closely; in fact, however, the difference in height is insignificant. The bird painted on the front part of the vessel (hardly recognizable on Fig. 3, left) has become a small, shapeless four-legged animal with a disproportionately long body.

Baumgartel (1960: 6) made a conjecture that, to some extent, the stylistic oddities in the decoration of the handle result from the material on which the representation occurred. Decoration engraved in metal may differ from painted decoration. Yet the fact should not be overrated as all the changes seem to bend in one direction: to endow each element with qualities unencountered elsewhere and even Baumgartel admits that engraving in metal does not explain the snake-like arm of one of the women. Moreover, one can hardly agree that the double outline of the silhouettes is the result of engraving in metal because there is no obstacle to depicting painted figures in the same way.

The most difficult problem to settle, however, is the shape of the handle. This is the only thus shaped handle of a fishtail blade. Yet a dagger found at el-Amrah which does not belong to the fishtail type (Randall-McIver and Mace 1902: 23, 40, Pl. VI: 1 : 2, described as a copper one in the publication and found to be made of silver when cleaned — Baumgartel 1960: 9) has an ivory handle almost identically shaped. This is the only analogue of the Gebelein handle as regards the shape<sup>5</sup>. One can hardly surmise that the former was a model for the latter as the el-Amrah dagger was found (in a grave, though a plundered one) roughly at the time when the Gebelein dagger was purchased, and published one year after the publication of Quibell's (1901) paper.

<sup>5</sup> The object found at Hierakonpolis (Quibell and Green, 1902: 50, Pl. LXIV: 7) may be a fragment of a similar handle. In the publication it is described as a fragment of a fan handle. Perhaps the semicircular lines on the blade of another, copper dagger also found at el-Amrah (Randall-McIver and Mace 1902: 20, Pl. X: 5; Baumgartel 1960: Pl. II: 9) are traces of a similar handle.

As regards the other two gold handles of flint knives known, the handle of Djer knife (Needler 1956) was made by wrapping gold foil round the tip of the flint blade, and the thickness of another knife, also in Cairo (Quibell 1904; 1905: no. 14265)<sup>6</sup>, is likewise only slightly bigger than that of the blade, whereas the handle of the Gebelein dagger is rather heavy and massive. Hence, contrary to Quibell's (1901) assertion, it does not seem plausible that it was made only of a thin gold sheet. But if the handle had been made of solid gold, too great quantity of this metal would have been necessary. Probably it is only gold-covered.

The fastening of the handle to the fishtail blade, by means of three rivets, is also without parallel. The handle of the silver el-Amrah dagger is fastened with one rivet. It is beyond doubt that at least the middle rivet passes through the blade of the Gebelein dagger because it is not possible that the blade could end just after getting between the two parts of the handle, and it cannot be excluded that the two side rivets do not pierce the blade because of its getting narrower or being notched at this point. But no other fishtail blade bears traces of fastening a handle in such a way. None has any holes at the pointed end and boring such a hole in flint would have been a serious technical problem in predynastic times. Clay models of fishtails from Hierakonpolis (Quibell and Green 1902: Pl. LXVIII: 2) carry such holes, but they were undoubtedly used for suspension of small-sized models. Most probably the hole in the only metal fishtail blade known (Ayrton and Loat 1911: Pl. XIX: 5), had the same function because of its run from edge to edge.

There is much to indicate that, whatever their function, fishtail blades had handles of different type: string was wound round their pointed ends and Petrie found such a blade with traces of string at Nagada (Petrie and Quibell 1896: 41).

In comparison with the handle of the el-Amrah dagger, the proportions of the Gebelein handle are markedly distorted: the shank is longer and the tips clasping the blade are relatively smaller and less hooked. Baumgartel (1960: 6) also pointed out that the handle is too small in comparison with the blade and does not cover the edges which are left unfinished.

As has been mentioned above, the dagger in question comes from purchase. The dealer insisted that it had been found in a grave with three other flint knives, a stone knife with a fragment of an ivory handle, a wooden staff, a vessel with boats painted on it, and a wooden bedstead with legs shaped like bull's feet<sup>7</sup>. The chronological inconsistency of these objects is noteworthy: furniture with legs shaped like bull's legs does not precede the First Dynasty, while vessels with painted boats are typical of Nagada II. It is not very plausible, therefore, that the above mentioned objects were

<sup>6</sup> Its decoration is figural, but without human silhouettes. It is the only one mentioned by Maspero (1910: 518; 1915: 299) as an analogue of the handle of the Gebelein dagger.

<sup>7</sup> The relics purchased by Quibell feature in *Journal d'entrée* under 34210 - 34217; there are as many numbers as objects, but the stone knife and its ivory handle bear separate numbers. *Journal d'entrée* makes no mention of the bedstead.

found in one grave. This does not necessarily provide evidence against the authenticity of the dagger<sup>8</sup>, although it does add to doubts around it. Yet, even though the authenticity of the fishtail blade raises no doubt, which also applies to the flint knives purchased at the same time, the vessel with painted boats has not been published and I have had no access to it either<sup>9</sup>; the wooden staff and the stone knife, as observed by Davis (1981: 36, note), could also be forgeries.

It is not without significance that the object in question comes from the vicinity of Gebelein. Many very strange objects including, among others, a group of vessels painted red on buff like Decorated pottery, but with very peculiar decoration (el-Yakhy 1981: Fig. A: 3, 9, 12, 13; Waite 1951: Pl. 14; Widmer 1968), come from the area. The three women standing on the boat without cabins are reminiscent of the scenes painted on some of them (*e.g.*, Widmer 1968: Fig. 2). The authenticity of these vessels and other objects has not been definitely settled, but their decoration is so distinct that if they were authentic, one could speak of a local convention of decorating vessels and other objects (Kantor 1944: 122, el-Yakhy 1981: 83). Yet there is more ground for believing that the peculiar decoration is a modern addition to genuine predynastic vessels (Brunton 1934; Crowfoot-Payne *et al.* 1977; Bourriau 1981: 40). It is very probable that new predynastic relics were produced and genuine objects additionally embellished with painted or engraved ornaments in order to increase their price in a centre operating near Gebelein at the turn of the 19th century. Davis (1981: 36, note) has recently pointed out the need for a re-examination of all relics originating from the area.

There is much to indicate that the pattern engraved on the handle might have been copied from the decoration on a vessel now in a private collection in Switzerland. We have no data as to the provenance of the vessel, but the MacGregor Collection included many, also genuine, objects purchased at Luxor and its vicinity. But if the copying had taken place in the predynastic period, this would have been the only known case of such practices.

One should not insist that every relic with slightly untypical qualities is a forgery. One may only speak about qualities departing from, or inconsistent with, the characteristics of the given period. The decoration of the handle bears many traits of the latter group.

It seems to be beyond doubt that the fastening of the handle to the authentic fishtail blade took place in modern times. In this case also soldering of the two parts of the handle considered strange by Quibell (1901) would not have been unlikely. But the shape of the handle is the foremost argument in favour of its authenticity,

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<sup>8</sup> Scharff (1929: 146; 1931: 44) mentions instances of relics of unquestioned authenticity having been quoted to come from one grave although, because of their chronology and type, they could not have been found together.

<sup>9</sup> *Journal d'entrée* No. 34216. It does not feature in the *Catalogue Général* (von Bissing 1913) although the volume was published thirteen years after the purchase of the set and comprises numbers beginning with 39.

though not necessarily in favour of the authenticity of the decoration. Without through technical investigation it is not possible to establish the authenticity of the handle. Yet one should be aware of the possibility that not only the fastening of the handle to the blade, but also the decoration took place in modern times in the mentioned centre near Gebelein.

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