

Geirr Kristian Homme Lunden Object W96, a Bronze Ibis

Description:

The object is listed as a bronze ibis figurine in the Egypt Centre catalogue.¹ This correlates with classifications of similar objects made by for instance the British Museum² and the Metropolitan Museum of Art³. By comparing it to birds present in Ancient Egypt it is possible it was an African

sacred ibis but also a flamingo or heron. The possibility is open as the beak, a most

distinguishing feature of the ibis, is broken off close to the base. As the sacred ibis was an important religious animal in Ancient Egypt, it is still the most likely bird to be depicted by far.⁴ (See Fig.



Figure 1: Object W96



Figure 2: African Sacred Ibis

¹W96, Swansea Egypt Centre: Search the Collection, 2014.

² EA11619, British Museum: Collection Online, 2014.

³ 04.2.462, Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Collection Online, 2014.

⁴Arnott, 2007, pp. 73-74.

The break at the base of the beak has a rough surface. Considering the size and shape of the beak on other figurines⁵ (see Fig. 3) it is not

surprising that this part of the statue has broken off. The lower part of the legs is missing as well. This break seems fairly smooth compared to the one at the beak. It might have been intentional or the figurine



Figure 3: 53.185a from the Metropolitan Museum

might have consisted of several separately made pieces linked together. The eyes

consist of two sockets. This suggests it at some point featured inlaid eyes. (See Fig. 3)⁶ This particular ibis figurine was likely a striding ibis as judged by the pose of the remainder of the legs.

The body itself is made akin to what seems to be the canon when portraying the ibis. The base of the neck features a very vivid spot of red, much more so than the other spots covering the object.

Table 1: Measurements as made by author

Measured area:	Length in millimetres
Beak – tail: Diagonal	112 millimetres
Neck – tail: Horizontal	91 millimetres
Body width (At widest point)	32 millimetres
Body top – leg break: Vertical	41 millimetres

The figurine weighs 380 grams. The size and weight of the figurine in its original form was likely

⁵For another example of the broken beak see: 10.184.4, Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Collection Online, 2014.

⁶ Or EA11619, British Museum: Collection Online, 2014. for another Late Period Ibis with inlaid glass eyes.

significantly higher. When comparing to other ibis figurines it seems like a stand was usual.⁷

The surface of the object is fairly smooth but one can feel the wear on it. This comes as no surprise seeing as it has suffered injury at some point in its life-cycle. The surface is made of metal.

Dating:

Dating an object of this type is somewhat difficult without knowing its find spot or having access to advanced dating methods. The fact that the figurine is made of bronze would immediately suggest it being from the Late or Graeco-Roman Period. Large collections of bronzes have been found and dated to this time.⁸ Any evidence from the usage or crafting method suggesting it being from this period is liable to be true. Several ibis figurines from several museums have been dated to these periods.⁹ It also seems that the ibis was a popular target for depiction during the Late Period and kept growing in popularity throughout the Graeco-Roman Period.¹⁰ The South Ibis Galleries in the animal necropolis of Saqqara were also built during the Late Period.¹¹ The trends therefore suggest this figurine being from the Late Period. This is assuming nothing about its possible method of production, materials or usage suggests differently with more tangible evidence.

⁷ For instance: EA11619, British Museum: Collection Online, 2014, 04.2.462, Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Collection Online, 2014, N 4118 F, Musee du Louvre: Atlas base des oeuvres exposees, 2014.

⁸ Such as the 1800 bronzes found at Saqqara (Wang, Huang & Sherman, 2009, p. 73).

⁹ For instance: EA11619, British Museum: Collection Online, 2014, 04.2.462, Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Collection Online, 2014, 53.185a, Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Collection Online, 2014, N 4118 F, Musee du Louvre: Atlas base des oeuvres exposees, 2014.

¹⁰ Bailleul-LeSuer, 2013, p. 30.

¹¹ Martin, 1981, p. 7.

The materials:

As the object was purchased by Wellcome at the Rustafjaell collection auction in 1906,¹² using the term 'bronze' about this item is somewhat dangerous. By looking at older Egyptological papers and catalogues, it becomes obvious that the term 'bronze' has been used loosely for the different forms of copper alloys that we find in Ancient Egypt.¹³ In modern times bronze would primarily mean a copper-tin alloy but this could also include copper-arsenic and copper-lead alloys in this case. Without any further modern analysis¹⁴ on the object it will not be possible to determine what copper-alloy W96 is made of. This is unfortunate as it would greatly help with the dating of the object and the original source of the ore used. Without actually knowing this, however, the object will still be referred to as 'bronze'.

In addition to the bronze body it is possible that two other materials were used. In one of the eye sockets there can be found traces of a red material. (See Fig. 4) This seems likely to have been an eye made of glass or faience. A Late Period Ibis in the British Museum features inlaid eyes as well. These eyes were made out of glass.¹⁵ The two objects



Figure 4: Close up of eye with traces of red material.

share distinct similarities. It is therefore possible that the material found in the W96's eye socket is glass as well because of the other similarities found. If this is the case, the possible age of the object becomes somewhat easier to determine. Glass seems to have been sparse up until the time of Thutmosis III. At that time it seems likely that glassmakers were brought to Egypt from foreign

¹²W96, Swansea Egypt Centre: Search the Collection, 2014.

¹³Ogden, 2000, p. 151.

¹⁴ See Modern Analyses later in essay for possible methods.

¹⁵EA11619, British Museum: Collection Online, 2014.

lands.¹⁶ While glass existed before this time as well it seems much more likely that the object stems from this time or later as the Egyptians were actually unable to manufacture glass for themselves and only reshaped foreign objects.¹⁷

The third possible material used is paint, or pigments. The possibility of such a material being used stems from a vividly coloured red stain near the base of the bronze ibis' neck. This stain is of a very different colour than the other marks of oxidation. (See Fig. 5) It does, however, seem unlikely that the object was painted red when comparing it to other pieces of Egyptian art. A faience sculpture from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (See Fig. 6) depicts a very

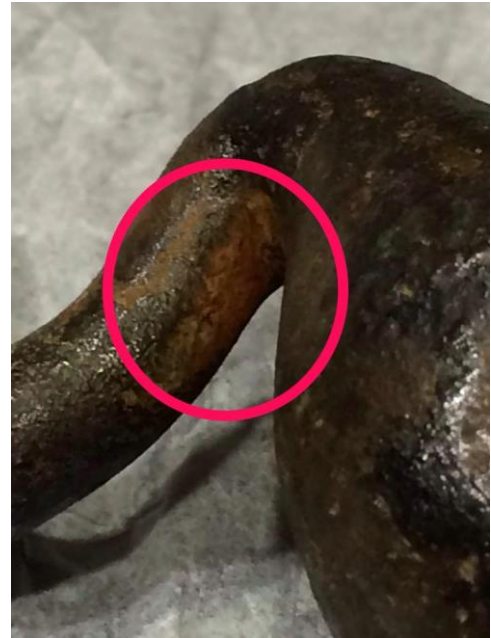


Figure 5: Close-up of red stain on ibis neck.

well preserved ibis with colouring intact. The similar



Figure 6: 26.7.992 from the
¹⁶Metropolitan Museum

¹⁷Nicholson & Henderson, 2000, pp. 195-196.

¹⁸Dickinson, 2003, p. 89.

colours make it even clearer that the faience ibis is depicting an African sacred ibis. (See Fig. 2) It seems like neither figurines nor reality features a sacred ibis with a red neck. The likelihood of red paint being used is therefore slim at best. This becomes even clearer when one takes into account that the only red-necked ibis species in the world is from South America.¹⁸ It would therefore not be something any person in Ancient Egypt could have seen. The stain on the neck is therefore likely

to simply be another spot marking deterioration.

The methods of production:



Figure 7: 43.2.2 from the Metropolitan Museum

W96 is likely to have been solid cast. As the body of the ibis remains fully intact it is, however, possible that another material could be found within the figurine. An ibis figurine from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (See Fig. 7) shows a technique where the metal has been applied to wood to create what might be a less expensive alternative as wood was generally less valuable than bronze.¹⁹ The fact that it remains whole in addition to its relative heavy weight of 380 grams still suggests that the core is bronze as well.

Finding the original location of the ore seems like an almost futile attempt. Egyptian copper was primarily mined from the eastern desert or Sinai.²⁰ Whether the bronze was smelted at the site of the mining or locally made is equally hard to say. If this truly is a bronze object with a copper-tin alloy the percentage of tin would make this easier. It was a common process to smelt the ore and make bronze at the mining site.²¹ During the New Kingdom, however, bronze seems to have been created using metallic tin rather than ore. This resulted in a higher percentage of tin than what could be found earlier. It would, however, likely mean that the bronze was made at the workshops as there has not been found a reliable income of tin for the Ancient Egyptians.²² It seems likelier that they would import the tin rather than the finished bronze for reworking.

¹⁹Richards, 1997, p. 38.

²⁰Ogden, 2000, p. 149.

²¹Ogden, 2000, p. 150.

²²Ogden, 2000, p. 153.

In terms of casting technique it is likely that the figurine was not made using a single mould. The

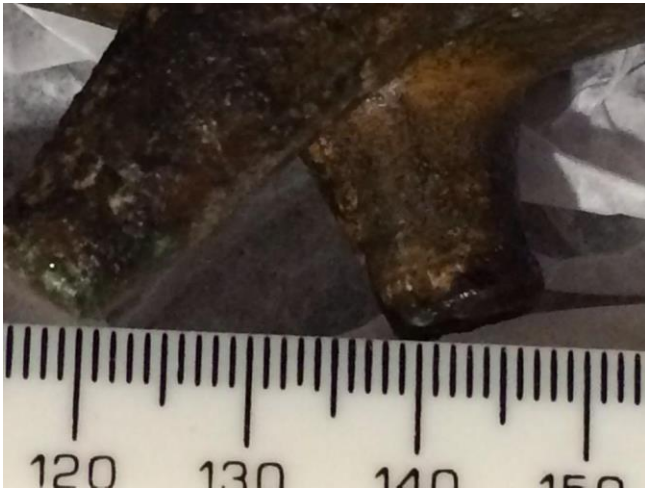


Figure 8: Close-up of clean break at legs.

clean break at the legs (See Fig. 8) would

suggest that these were attached later. The legs

could also have been attached to a foot or a

larger sculpture.²³ The finesse of the piece

backs up this claim. During the Late Period the

single cast moulds became more popular. This

meant mass production and, in turn, reduced

the quality of the artworks.²⁴ The inlaid eyes

also attest to this piece being worked after the initial casting was finished. These things might point

to the piece being from the New Kingdom. At this time, the solid cast figurines became more

popular. They had not, however, started to use the single mould mass production techniques to the

same extent of what was done in the Late Period.²⁵ This is evidence towards W96 being made

during the New Kingdom but it is not solid enough to be conclusive. Other ibis figurines such as the

Recumbent Ibis: the god Thoth in the Louvre²⁶ and The Sacred Ibis²⁷ in the Egyptian Museum in

Cairo have been dated to the Late Period. While they feature a wooden body they still show that

making the different parts in different casts was still occurring in this period.

If the figurine indeed once had red glass eyes, the history of the object might become somewhat

clearer. Locally made glass was, as previously stated, not present in Egypt until the New Kingdom.

It was likely produced using impure silica and lime.²⁸ Both of these materials were found plentiful

²³Garland & Bannister, 1927, p. 45.

²⁴Ogden, 2000, p 159.

²⁵Ogden, 2000, pp. 158-159.

²⁶ E 17380, Musée du Louvre: Atlas base des oeuvres exposées.

²⁷ JE 71972, Official Catalogue: The Egyptian Museum Cairo, 256.

²⁸Nicholson & Henderson, 2000, p. 197.

throughout Egypt. What was not plentiful, however, was red glass. According to Nicholson & Henderson, red glass was harder to produce than other coloured glass variants. One workshop that specialized in red glass was the one at Qantir, where they used copper to colour the glass. Qantir was a New Kingdom site that also hosted a bronze foundry.²⁹ While it is still not conclusive evidence, the figurine being made at Qantir does correlate with the red glass and the casting method.

The components of the copper-alloy could here, again, be useful information. The Ancient Egyptians gained access to ways of letting the slag run off the copper while still molten in the late New Kingdom.³⁰ This secured a more effective copper creation process. It also

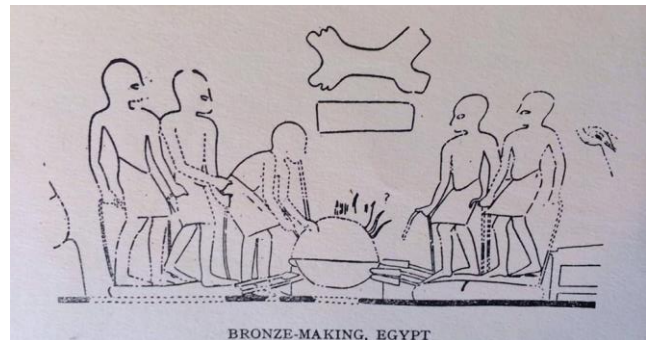


Figure 9: Depiction of Ancient Egyptian Bronze Smelting.

resulted in lower iron content in the Late Period.³¹ The iron content of the copper could therefore potentially certify whether the Bronze Ibis is New Kingdom or Late Period.

Usage:

Figurines such as W96 served several purposes in Ancient Egypt. They have been found in tombs, they were used in domestic religious rituals,³² and they were used as votive offerings.³³ The Swansea Egypt Centre suggests votive offering.³⁴ It is indeed this answer that seems to be the most likely one. Depending on the time period, the people of Ancient Egypt prayed themselves or passed the votive offering on to a priest who prayed for them. After the offering was completed, however, the priests were the ones who took care of the offerings according to custom.³⁵ The votive offerings

²⁹Nicholson & Henderson, 2000, p. 198.

³⁰Ogden, 2000, p. 152.

³¹Ogden, 2000, p. 152.

³²Commonly made of pottery (Stevens, 2009, p. 7).

³³Pinch & Waraksa, 2009, p. 1.

³⁴W96, Swansea Egypt Centre: Object File, 2014.

³⁵Pinch & Waraksa, 2009, p. 7.

were usually deposited into so called votive offering pits as one could not reuse the material or just throw them away without sacrilegious consequences.³⁶ If the Bronze Ibis stems from such a pit it is no wonder it has been damaged. If placed in a tomb the damage would be most likely to occur upon rediscovery. If it was sealed in a votive offering pit the chances of it being damaged by natural causes increases. The pits were reinforced but not as much as a tomb for one of the elite, which this figure must have belonged to.

Thoth's forms:

To further endorse this item as a votive offering rather than one used in personal worship it is important to look at the forms of Thoth. The god had two different animal forms, that of the ibis and that of the baboon. C. J. Bleeker writes about the likely differences in these two forms. The baboon form seems to be the one mostly used in personal worship³⁷ but there is not much is known about the reasoning behind this incarnation.³⁸ Thoth as an ibis, however, seems to have been related to the wisdom of the ibis. The ibis avoids poisoned water and helps clear the land of poisonous critters such as snakes and frogs. It has a cleansing role and it seems that this transferred into Thoth's depictions.³⁹ He was mainly depicted as an ibis or in his therianthropic form when he took active action and in his role as a judge.⁴⁰ It seems very plausible that a votive offering to Thoth as the ibis would be made when one was praying to him for justice.⁴¹ Thoth as the ibis, like most forms of every Egyptian god, had other roles and meanings as well but this one in particular strikes as likely when considering the figurine as a votive offering.

³⁶Pinch & Waraksa, 2009, p. 7.

³⁷Such as the Baboon Figurines from Old Kingdom Abydos (Stevens, 2009, p. 12, table 1).

³⁸Bleeker, 1973, p. 111.

³⁹ Bleeker, 1973, p. 110.

⁴⁰Bleeker, 1973, p. 108.

⁴¹ Bleeker, 1973, p. 154.

Reuse and Transformation:

This object being reused before its modern discovery is highly unlikely. If it was indeed a votive offering it would have been deemed sacrilege to not deposit it properly and reuse the item or material. There are, however, records of votive offerings being used as the foundation blocks of new temples.⁴² Considering the state of the figurine this also seems unlikely. If it was used as such a foundation it would probably have been more severely damaged. As the whereabouts of the object is hard to certify before 1906, however, it might have received some form of restorative preservation. This is unlikely to have been done by a professional and might simply have been a rough polish of the surface. If this was the case it could account for the loss of the beak, feet and eyes of the figurine. This solution does, however, take too many assumptions into consideration to have any real weight. The likelihood of any reuse after the deposition and before the modern rediscovery is therefore slim at best.

Deposition:

The deposition of the W96 was most likely intentional. If it was a votive offering from a temple it would have been taken care of accordingly and deposited into a votive pit.⁴³ If this deduction is wrong and it belonged to a tomb or a home it would probably still be deposited by intention. Items in tombs were left there intentionally. There is an off-chance that it could have been mistreated if placed in a home. It could have been an accident or it could have been left behind. These possibilities are, however, mere speculation. The damage the figurine has suffered likely occurred after deposition but before discovery but without its full life-cycle known it is hard to determine for certain. It is possible the legs were purposefully removed to resell at the time of its modern rediscovery.

⁴² Pinch & Warakasa, 2009, p. 7.

⁴³ Pinch & Warakasa, 2009, p. 7.

Rediscovery:

The rediscovery of the W96 is hard to certify. It came into the collection of Robert de Rustafjaell at some point prior to the 19th of December 1906 when the auction it was listed in commenced.

Rustafjaell was a geologist and mining engineer.⁴⁴ He obtained most of his collection when he was in Egypt. At least some of these items were bought from locals.⁴⁵ He might also have found some artefacts as part of his work. It seems unlikely that any of the objects was found as part of an actual excavation rather than just accident or locals looking for artefacts to sell. It seems likely, however, that Rustafjaell was the one who brought the Bronze Ibis out of Egypt. While he did publish several books related to Egyptology⁴⁶ it does not seem like any of them had anything to do with the material, the time period or the type of artefact in question. It therefore seems like it was not an item that would have gained much attention from him. Wellcome bought the item for a Soetheby auction. It is quite possible this was done in person as he seems to have had a break from the travelling he had started undertaking in the winter of 1906.⁴⁷ The Swansea Egypt Centre acquired the items from the Wellcome collection in 1971.⁴⁸ It seems unlikely that any damage would have occurred after Wellcome acquired the Bronze Ibis. If it did, the missing pieces of the figurine would probably be put together with the object. It is possible it happened in Rustafjaell's care but if the missing eyes, legs and beak are indeed a case of modern destruction it is most likely that it occurred upon or prior to Rustafjaell's acquisition of the item.

⁴⁴Bierbrier et. al., 1995, p. 368.

⁴⁵For instance the Rustafjaell Papyri. See Porten, B. et al., 1996, p. 5.

⁴⁶Such as *Palaeolithic Vessels of Egypt* (1907) and *The Stone Age in Egypt* (1914).

⁴⁷James, 1994, p. 294.

⁴⁸How the Egypt Centre was Born, 2014, p. 1.

Modern Analyses:

As previously discussed the dating and find spot of this object is very uncertain. Any form of modern analyses would therefore be used mainly to find these. For the dating of a metal object, such as the W96, thermoluminescence dating would be the first choice.⁴⁹ The problem with using this technique is that an analysis made a long time after the object is excavated is unreliable.⁵⁰ The Bronze Ibis was unearthed more than a hundred years ago. Without provenance either, the technique becomes close to useless.⁵¹ An absolute date will therefore be very unlikely to achieve. Spending money and damaging the object without knowing it will result in an answer seems wasteful. An analysis to find the components of the copper alloy in this figurine can, however, help set a more likely date. As previously mentioned, the amount of tin and iron in this alloy might point it in the direction of the New Kingdom. If it contains a high amount of lead and little iron, however, it might indicate the figurine came from the same time as the bronze artefacts found at Saqqara.⁵² These objects are dated to around 600 B.C.E., the Late Period.⁵³ Energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence could be used on this object. Seeing as the object is not as corroded as some other objects⁵⁴ the main weakness of this technique is removed.⁵⁵ The technique is non-destructive and fairly cheap.⁵⁶ This could help establish provenance but the question remains whether this is necessary. What is currently located in the Swansea Egypt Centre is simply an ibis. Without the base that could have contained text it does not seem like establishing this information would do much other than let a museum put the time period in their catalogue. As it would still only be a relative date it seems like the info obtained would be of little use unless a larger research project which included this figurine took place.

⁴⁹Goedicke, 2006, p. 356.

⁵⁰Goedicke, 2006, p. 357.

⁵¹Goedicke, 2006, p. 357.

⁵²Wang, Huang & Sherman, 2009, pp. 75-76.

⁵³Wang, Huang & Sherman, 2009, p. 73.

⁵⁴Wang, Huang & Sherman, 2009, p. 74, Figure 1 & p. 78, Figure 6.

⁵⁵Agresti, Mencaglia & Siano, 2009, p. 2255.

⁵⁶Lutz & Pernicka, 1996, p. 313.

Display:

Currently object W96 is on display in the House of Death in the Swansea Egypt Centre. It is located in what is called the Animal Case. It is noted both in the museum hand-out for animals and gods in relation to Thoth. There is, however, no information on the object other than it being an ibis and ibises being an animal representing Thoth. If the figurine is indeed a votive offering, placing it in the House of Death seems like misplacement. The votive offerings were offered for prayers concerning the living and the dead.⁵⁷ While they were related to the cults it did not necessarily mean they had anything to do with funeral rites. The animal case is likely placed in the House of Death because of the numerous mummified animals inside it. These animals are also likely to have been votive offerings and as such they belong together with the bronze ibis.⁵⁸ The whole case cannot be moved to the House of Life because of this. Putting the ibis in the votive case in the House of Life would seem fitting but if this was done with all the likely votive offerings of the animal case, the case would be close to empty. The museum has to be careful when considering the amount of religious artefacts put into one specific house. This especially concerns the House of Death as the god-case has been placed here as well. This boils down to the effectiveness of so clearly separating life and death into two different rooms. In Ancient Egypt, the religious rituals concerning life and death were probably not as black and white as this separation might imply. None of the two cases can be moved from the House of Death into the House of Life but they do not fully belong where they are. There is no reason in itself for the figurine not to be displayed in the Animal Case, of course, but as it is given very little attention the question of whether it could not serve a better function elsewhere arises. The problem of classifying this as a votive offering, however, is that it is not an undisputable fact. If the base of the figurine was still attached it is likely that it could have been classified with more certainty. As it is now, however, it is hard to classify it as anything but an ibis figurine. Displaying it in a case with other important and often sacred animals therefore becomes the most viable solution without portraying assumptions as facts. One of the only other

⁵⁷Pinch & Waraksa, 2009, p. 1 & Bleeker, 1973, p. 153.

⁵⁸Bailleul-LeSuer, 2012, p. 30.

alternatives would be to display it together with a figurine of Thoth in his therianthrope shape. This would imply a more religious context and separate the figurine from being simply a bird to a representation of Thoth. In the locales of the current museum, however, this would prove troublesome as doing this would require it to be done with every other anthropomorphic or therianthrope god as well. The size of the House of Death makes this very complicated. As the Swansea Egypt Centre today stands with its separated rooms dedicated to life and death it becomes clear that W96 has found its most fitting place in this collection. In another museum, however, it could probably have been exploited more thoroughly by showing of its religious symbolism.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the W96 is an object with very few undeniable truths attached to it. Through looking at trends in usage of materials, casting techniques, religious practices and culture in Ancient Egyptian history one can find likely answers to the questions surrounding the object. None of these answers are, however, certain. Through the trends in religious practice and iconography as well as the usage of material, the Late Period seems like the most likely time of creation, even if some of the features seem to fit better with the New Kingdom. The find spot of the object is probably lost, but it was likely related to a cult-centre of Thoth. This might suggest Hermopolis and Saqqara as good possibilities as they match with the time period. More secure info on the time period might be attained from an analysis of the copper-alloy composition but it is questionable what one would do with this info. Above all else, the Bronze Ibis serves as a perfect example of artefacts hard to find provenance for on basis of both destruction of the item, and for the lack of info on artefacts removed from Egypt prior to 1973⁵⁹ by individuals not related to official scientific excavations. It also provides an example on why leaving some excavation work for the future is important as technologies similar to thermoluminescence dating might develop and provide methods of dating exclusive to future excavations.

⁵⁹When Egypt ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

Word Count: 3838

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Figure 2: iNaturalist.org. Retrieved December 9th, 2014, from:

<http://www.inaturalist.org/observations/22144>

Figure 3: Metropolitan Museum of art. Retrieved December 9th, 2014, from:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/546053?rpp=30&pg=1&ao=on&ft=ibis&pos=15>

Figure 4: Courtesy of author.

Figure 5: Courtesy of author.

Figure 6: Metropolitan Museum of art. Retrieved November 4th, 2014, from:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/544093?rpp=30&pg=1&ao=on&ft=ibis&pos=4>

Figure 7: Metropolitan Museum of art. Retrieved November 4th, 2014, from:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/546195?rpp=30&pg=1&ao=on&ft=ibis&pos=16&imgNo=3&tabName=related-objects>

Figure 8: Courtesy of author.

Figure 9: Wainwright (1943) p. 97.

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