

PHALLIC FIGURES IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM, PRAGUE

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ABSTRACT: The main aim of this article is the publication of certain objects held in the collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague. After a short introduction concerning important characteristics of the objects and the current state of research, a list follows with some of the technical details and a description of the 16 objects. In the last paragraph, a short summary of the objects is given, providing a basis of comparison of the figures with other objects of the same icon.

KEYWORDS: phallic figure – symplegma – sexual intercourse – figures

Introduction

This article deals with objects showing a man with a disproportionately large phallus. In general, the figures are shown naked, in rare cases some clothing is shown. However, it is, as a rule, draped in such a way that the phallus is still obvious. In addition to the oversized phallus, the figure can carry a variety of smaller attributes. In some objects, sexual intercourse between at least two people is shown. It is currently believed that these objects date from the Late to Roman Period. These can be either statuettes or amulets and the variety of materials used is correspondingly large. More than 700 figures with this iconography are known worldwide – with many more possibly still unknown for scientific processing.²

One of the first descriptions of these objects in the literature is written in a discreet comment by C. Gutch in the publication of the 1898–1899 campaign of the excavations in Naukratis.³ Today, these finds are kept in the British Museum in London and represent an important set for the study of this field. The context of these finds is comparable to a hoard recovered at Saqqara which was excavated by E. Quibell.⁴ Few dedicated studies have dealt with these objects since. Rather, they were used as illustrations in the field of sexology (in studies on the history of sexuality) or to support statements on the sexual lives of ancient Egyptians.⁵ One of the first articles dedicated specifically to these

1 Contact: Nadja Böckler, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, München, Germany; e-mail: nadja.boeckler@smaek.de. This article is a brief insight into my current PhD project. I would like to take this opportunity to thank P. Onderka who made it possible for me to work on the objects as part of my dissertation. For all his help concerning this article many thanks to Jiří Honzl. At the stage of writing this paper my PhD project was ongoing, by Oct. 2020 submitted, in Feb. 2021 defended, I may also thank Prof. J. Budka for having a critical look on this paper and S. Focke for a precise look on the English language.

2 For an extensive catalogue see Böckler 2021.

3 Gutch 1898–1899, p. 94, nos. 271–280.

4 Quibell 1907, pp. 13, 28.

5 e.g., Moll 1911, p. 573; Omlin 1973, pl. XXX–XXXI; de Rachewiltz 1965, pp. 27–66. In Manniche 1987 many images of phallic figures are used as illustrations. Two of the newest publications are: Montserrat 1996; Mysliwiec 2004.

objects was the publication by A. H. Zayed on the private collection of Albert Eid in 1962.⁶ It was followed by the work of P. Derchain⁷ and G. Martin⁸ in the 1980s. In 2002, C. Cozzolino called on Egyptologists to take a closer look at these objects.⁹ This request is now being answered, in particular for the objects in the Náprstek Museum in Prague.

Before dealing the objects themselves, the issue of their terminology needs to be addressed, as there is no universally accepted term for them. In scholarly literature, the figures are called 'phallic figure',¹⁰ 'naukratic figure',¹¹ 'erotic figure/amulet/group'¹², or denominated by descriptive appellations (for example 'male figure, sitting, ithyphallic').¹³ There are more terms used, some of them merely descriptive, others having a negative connotation. The term 'erotic' is in several aspects problematic and should ideally be replaced.¹⁴ Firstly, the attribute 'erotic' was applied by modern scholars to ancient objects, the function of which is still unclear. Secondly, we have limited means to properly assess the understanding and meaning of 'erotic' in ancient cultures. That said, in the meantime, the terms 'erotic' figure or 'erotic' amulet continue to be used as they are also used in fundamental literature on the topic,¹⁵ although they should be treated with necessary caution.¹⁶

Catalogue

No. 1

Inv. No.: P 235

Measurements: l. 3.9 cm, d. 1.4 cm, h. 8.5 cm

Date: 2nd century CE¹⁷

Provenance: unknown

Material: red clay, porous

The figure is completely preserved whilst most of the surface worn. Remains of white slip are preserved on the whole surface of the object. The rear side is pale and smooth.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His right leg is bent with the foot flat on the base. The upper body is straight showing a curve of the spine. His right elbow is rested on the right knee with the hand sideways on the shaft of the phallus. The phallus is shown erect, in a vertical position, and the glans is separated from the

6 Zayed 1962, pp. 103–105.

7 Derchain 1981.

8 Martin 1987.

9 Cozzolino 2002, pp. 77–79.

10 Attula 2001, no. 115; Myśliwiec 1997, p. 122, pl. 8; Schlick-Nolte and Droste zu Hülshoff 1990, p. 284ff., nos. 265–267.

11 Particularly in the online collection of the British Museum, e.g. The British Museum, –2022, Inv. Nos. EA 20730, EA 27698, EA 59082, EA 90339, EA 90340, EA 90356.

12 e.g. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, –2022, Inv. Nos. 66.323, 72.4053. The term is also used in publications, e.g. Grimm & Schoske 2010, p. 102, nos. 42, 44.

13 e.g. see comparable objects in the online collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge, –2022.

14 For a concrete proposal see Böckler 2021, pp. 35–41.

15 One of the main publications on this subject is Martin 1987.

16 For a detailed discussion concerning the problem of naming of these objects, see Böckler 2021, pp. 33–42.

17 Smoláriková 2010, p. 58, no. 58.

shaft and narrows at the tip. The head is turned to the right. The details of the face are not distinct, likely due to wear. On the right side of the head is the sidelock of youth.

A similar object, originally found in Greece, is currently on display in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig.¹⁸

No. 2

Inv. No.: P 313

Measurements: l. 4.5 cm, d. 3.3 cm, h. 1.5 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period

Provenance: unknown

Material: green faience

The figure is not completely preserved. Parts of the upper body of the male figure are missing. Both feet are missing as well as the right leg from the female body.

The figures of a man and a woman are placed on a T-shaped base with the man at a right angle to the woman. The man is kneeling. The phallus is horizontal with the glans separated from the shaft. The tip of the phallus ends at the vulva of the woman.

The woman is lying on her left side. Her legs and left foot are gently bent. The upper body is showing a small belly, navel, and breasts. Her right elbow is rested on her waist with the right hand on top of the phallus. The left arm is bent at the elbow and reaches upwards with her head rested in her left hand. The head is aligned frontally, the details of the face are well distinct. The details of the wig are emphasised by a darker shade.

No. 3

Inv. No.: P 315

Measurements: l. 2.5 cm, d. 2.2 cm, h. 4.4 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period

Provenance: unknown

Material: green faience

The figure is completely preserved. There is a little damage on the base and the arm whilst most of the surface is worn.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His legs are bent, both feet flat on the base. The upper body is straight showing a curve of the spine. His right elbow is rested on the right knee with the hand on the shaft of the phallus. The left forearm is lying sideways of the shaft of the phallus from the other side. The phallus is shown erect, bent over the left shoulder in a right angle and ending on the right shoulder. The glans is separated from the shaft, a longish notch designates the urethra. The head is aligned frontally, the details of the face are well distinct, especially the circular eyes. Both ears are shown.

No. 4

Inv. No.: P 1965

Measurements: l. 5.3 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period

¹⁸ Accession No. Aeg T46. Published in Tiniius 2011, p. 102.

Provenance: unknown
Material: green faience

The figure is completely preserved.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His legs are bent with his feet flat on the base. The upper body is straight. Both elbows are rested on the knees holding a tubular drum on top of the phallus. The phallus is shown horizontally stretched, the glans is separated from the shaft and narrows at the tip, a longish notch designates the urethra. The head is turned to the right side and the details of the face are not well distinct and only roughly indicated.

No. 5

Inv. No.: P 1979
Measurements: l. 8.4 cm, d. 2.0 cm, h. 5.1 cm
Date: Late Period
Provenance: unknown
Material: limestone with some remains of painting

The figure is completely preserved whilst most of the surface is worn.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His legs are bent, the feet not shown in detail. The upper body is straight. Both elbows are rested on the knees holding a stela on top of the phallus.¹⁹ The phallus is shown horizontally stretched, the glans is separated from the shaft and narrows at the tip. The head is aligned frontally. The details of the face are shown in a stylised way. On the right side of the head is the sidelock of youth.

No. 6

Inv. No.: P 1985
Measurements: l. 4.8 cm, d. 1.4 cm, h. 2.5 cm
Date: Ptolemaic Period
Provenance: unknown
Material: green faience

The figure is not completely preserved; the second person is missing, the hands of the first person are missing. Most of the surface is worn.

The figure of the woman is placed on a rectangular base. The legs are bent, the toes and knees are on the base, and the buttocks are above the heels. The upper body is straight and leant forward. The elbows are rested on the base in line with the shoulders. The hands will have been under the head. The head is turned to the left. The details of

19 For other examples of this attribute see Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge, –2022, Inv. No. E93.1914.; The British Museum, –2022, Inv. No. EA 20730; Louvre, –2022, Inv. Nos. E13230, E13231. Especially the last one is important for the identification, as the remaining colours preserve the lines on the stela. Other interpretation for this kind of attributes is their identification as a musical instrument, namely a tambour. Tambours are also attested as attributes in this kind of objects, but their iconography varies from the stelae; they are of round shape, shown in profile; e.g. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Inv. No. AN1966.1079 (published in Böckler 2021, p. 736); Louvre, –2022, Inv. Nos. AF11838, E3598. For the identification of the attribute see Böckler 2021, pp. 81–82, 170, 172, fig. 25.

the face are well distinct; a slightly raised nose and deep eyes are clearly visible. There is a wig on the head. There are remains of the phallus still visible on the buttocks of the female figure, indicating that there could have been a second person.

No. 7

Inv. No.: P 1986

Measurements: l. 5.4 cm, d. 1.5 cm, h. 2.7 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period

Provenance: unknown

Material: green faience

The figure is not complete: the head of the second person and the upper end of the harp are missing. Most of the surface is worn.

The figures of a man and a second person are placed on a rectangular base.

The legs of the man are bent with the feet not visible. The upper body is rounded. The elbows rest on the knees, the hands are playing a harp standing on top of the shaft of the phallus. The phallus is shown erect in a diagonal position. The head is turned to the right, the details of the face are not well distinct.

The legs of the second person are bent with her toes and knees on the base, the buttocks are above the heels. The upper body is straight and leant forwards. Her arms are lying sideways of her upper body with her hands reaching for her buttocks.

No. 8

Inv. No.: P 1987

Measurements: l. 5.5 cm, d. 1.5 cm, h. 2.9 cm

Date: Roman Period

Provenance: unknown

Material: green faience

The figure is completely preserved, the rear side is smooth.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base, lying on his left side. His legs are lying stretched out one on top of the other, both feet are bent. The upper body is covered by the phallus. The right arm is resting on the shaft of the phallus. The head rests in the left arm. The phallus forms an arc in front of the man (ending under his left shoulder). The glans is separated from the shaft, the urethra is distinct. The head is aligned frontally, the details of which are well distinct; a long nose, slightly triangular eyes, and a visible hairline. On the right side of the head, there is an ear.

No. 9

Inv. No.: P 1988

Measurements: l. 5.6 cm, d. 1.4 cm, h. 2.1 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period

Provenance: unknown

Material: green faience

The figure is not completely preserved: base, phallus, and feet are missing. Most of the surface is worn.

A man is shown in a lying position. Both legs are lying stretched out on top of one another. The upper body is raised slightly towards the shoulder showing a small belly with a navel. The right hand is rested on the upper end of the shaft of the phallus, the head is rested on the left hand. The phallus can be reconstructed forming an arc in front of the man. The head is aligned frontally, the details of the face are well distinct. On the right side of the head, there is an ear and sidelock of youth.

No. 10

Inv. No.: P 1994

Measurements: l. 5.2 cm, d. 2.8 cm, h. 7.6 cm

Date: Roma Period

Provenance: unknown

Material: limestone with remains of black and brown colour

The figure is not completely preserved; a second person is missing, legs of the first person are missing. Most of the surface is worn.

The figure shows a woman. Her thighs are oriented slightly forwards; her legs can be reconstructed in a standing position. Her upper body is straight, showing a curve of the spine. Her arms are bent in her elbows with the hand holding a harp in front of her chest. The head is turned slightly to the right, the details of the face are distinct. There is a wig structured by strands on the head.

The tip of a phallus with remains of brown colour ends at the woman's womb.

No. 11

Inv. No.: P 6149

Measurements: l. 3.6 cm, d. 3.0 cm, h. 6.6 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period²⁰

Provenance: unknown

Material: limestone with remains of polychrome painting

The figure is completely preserved, most of the surface is worn, with some remnants of brown.

The figure of a man is placed on a rounded base. His legs are bent with the feet flat on the base. The upper body is straight, showing a curve of the spine. His arms are bent at the elbows with hands sideways on the shaft of the phallus. The phallus is shown erect in a vertical position, the glans is separated from the shaft and narrows to its tip. A round notch designates the urethra. The head is turned to the right, the details of the face are not well distinct, likely due to wear. Hair is shown on top of the head.

No. 12

Inv. No.: P 6150

Measurements: l. 7.4 cm, d. 1.9 cm, h. 4.9 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period²¹

²⁰ Vrtal 2013, p. 63.

²¹ Vrtal 2013, p. 63.

Provenance: unknown

Material: limestone with remains of polychrome painting

The figure is completely preserved, the head is reattached to the rest, most of the surface is worn with remnants of brown.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His legs are bent, the feet not shown in detail. The upper body is straight. The elbows are rested on the thighs with the hands holding a stela on top of the shaft of the phallus. The phallus is horizontal, the glans is separated from the shaft and narrows at the tip. The head is aligned frontally, the details of the face are not well distinct, likely due to wear. On the right side of the head is a sidelock of youth.

No. 13

Inv. No.: P 6152

Measurements: l. 12.4 cm, d. 5.6 cm, h. 14.0 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period²²

Provenance: unknown

Material: limestone with remains of polychrome painting

The figure is not completely preserved; the end of the phallus is missing. Remains of white slip and brown colour are preserved on the whole surface of the object.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His legs are bent with the feet flat on the base. The upper body is straight showing a curve of the spine. His arms are slightly bent and stretched forward with the hands holding a tubular drum standing on the shaft of the phallus. The phallus is horizontal. The head is aligned frontally. The details of the face are well distinct, likewise the hair and the beard.²³

No. 14

Inv. No.: P 6239

Measurements: l. 12.4 cm, d. 4.7 cm, h. 5.0 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period²⁴

Provenance: unknown

Material: limestone with remains of polychrome painting

The figure is not completely preserved; the head and left arm are missing. Most of the surface is worn. There are remnants of slip and colour on the whole surface of the object.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base. His legs are bent with the feet flat on the base. The upper body is slightly rounded. His right arm is rested on the right knee with the hand lying sideways on the shaft of the phallus. The phallus is horizontal, the glans is separated from the shaft. A longish notch designates the urethra.

22 Vrtal 2013, p. 64.

23 According to Vrtal 2013, p. 64 the beard is a deliberate expression of male sexuality and a reference to Bes.

24 Vrtal 2013, p. 64.

No. 15

Inv. No.: P 6240²⁵

Measurements: l. 4.5 cm, d. 2.5 cm, h. 6.4 cm

Date: 2nd–3rd century CE²⁶

Provenance: unknown

Material: red clay with remains of white slip, put together from two moulds

The figure is completely preserved, most of the surface is worn. Remnants of white slip are preserved on the whole surface of the object.

The figure of a man is placed on an oblong base. Both legs are bent with the feet flat on the base. The upper body is straight showing a belly and breasts and the ribs on the rear side. The arms are rested on the knees, bent at the elbows with the hands reaching towards the face. The phallus is horizontal, the glans is separated from the shaft and narrows at the tip. A longish notch designates the urethra. The head is aligned frontally. The details of the face are not well distinct, likely due to wear.

No. 16

Inv. No.: P 6240

Measurements: l. 4.4 cm, d. 1.3 cm, h. 3.2 cm

Date: Ptolemaic Period²⁷

Provenance: unknown

Material: blue faience

The figure is not completely preserved; the legs are missing. Most of the surface is worn.

The figure of a man is placed on a rectangular base, lying on his left side. The upper body is straight. The right arm is resting on the shaft of the phallus with the head rested in the left arm. The phallus forms an arc in front of the man (ending under his left shoulder). The head is aligned frontally, the details are not well distinct, likely due to wear. On the right side of the head is a sidelock of youth.

Summary of the objects from the Náprstek Museum in Prague and comparison with other examples

The corpus of the objects from the Náprstek Museum were made of various materials and were of different dates. The set contains statuettes as well as amulets representing man with a disproportionate phallus.

Three different phallus directions could be found in the Náprstek Museum figures; horizontally in front of the man [No. 5], coiled around the man's body [No. 16] or vertically upwards (No. 1). Sitting or kneeling men with a vertical phallus can either hold it vertically upwards [Nos. 1, 11] or drape it around their neck [No. 2]. There is also

25 This figure differs significantly in its construction from the ones discussed so far. For an answer to the question of whether it could be a representation of a woman riding a phallus, see *Civico Museo di Storia ed Arte, Trieste*, Inv. No. 11852, published in *Crevatin and Torlo* 2013, p. 234, 9.25. This figure shows an almost identical structure, only the arm position varies. There is no indication that the phallus does not belong to the person depicted.

26 *Smoláriková* 2010, p. 59, no. 59.

27 *Vrtal* 2013, p. 64.

a fourth type of phallic figures which is not represented in the discussed collection, that is figures with phallus pointing vertically downwards.²⁸

Figures of a man are shown in a sitting, kneeling, lying or standing position. All the objects in the Náprstek Museum in Prague show the man as naked, but the category phallic figures also includes depictions of men with pleated kilt²⁹ or short cloak around the shoulders.³⁰ As stated above, even if clothing is shown, it is always draped in such way that the phallus remains clearly visible.

Legs and torsos of the Náprstek Museum figures are not always shown in detail; for example, the feet can merge directly into the base. The face can exhibit detailed eyes, nose, and lips, or the facial features are reduced to geometrical forms. Most figures have bald heads or a small line illustrating the hairline. In some cases, there are elaborate headdresses. The sidelock of youth can be combined with a bald head or even one kind of headdress.³¹

The objects, arranged in a very detailed way, allow to identify the two people of the group figures as a man and a woman [Nos. 2, 6].³² On the other hand, there are cases of couples consisting of a man with a person whose gender is not explicitly shown [No. 7].³³ These couples either show penetration or the woman is simply sitting on top of the phallus.³⁴ But phallic groups were not necessarily limited to just two persons; objects in other museum collections comprise three, four, or even seven people. Groups of this kind are always composed of one woman with several men.³⁵ It might be that one of the objects in the Náprstek Museum (No. 10), too, originally belonged to a group of more than two persons.

Amongst the objects currently in the Náprstek Museum in Prague, some show figures with an attribute. Two objects [Nos. 5, 12] show a stela, two [Nos. 7, 10] a harp, and two [Nos. 4, 13] a tubular drum. In most cases of phallic figures, the attribute is in the hands of the men, but No. 10 proves that women can also carry an attribute (in this case a harp).

The Náprstek figures were made of terracotta, limestone, or faience. The limestone objects in particular often have remnants of colour pigments on the surface that show that the body of the male was given an ochre tone.³⁶ The hair and details of the body were accentuated with black, even the phallus.

In summary, the phallic figures in the Náprstek Museum in Prague may be considered as a representative selection of this class of objects. This refers not only to the material, postures of the man or the directions of the phallus, but also to the configuration of the figures in the groups.

28 e.g. Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerpen, Inv. No. AV.1879.001.236 (Oost and de Caluwe 1995, p. 189) or Sammlung Bibel und Orient, Freiburg, Inv. No. M.A. 974 (Herrmann 2003, p. 84, pl. L, no. 374).

29 Compare with Schoske 1995, p. 64.

30 Bailey 2008, pl. 37, nos. 3210, 3211.

31 Compare the different faces and headdresses with Loeben 2016, p. 121.

32 Wildung 1980, p. 26.

33 e.g. Bailey 2008, pl. 46, no. 3265.

34 e.g. Brooklyn Museum, –2022, Inv. No. 58.34.

35 Fazzini 1989, no. 82.

36 e.g. Schoske 1995, p. 64. Here it is obvious that the man has ochre-coloured skin whereas the woman is much lighter-skinned.

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No. 1



No. 2



No. 3

Pl. 2



No. 4

No.



No. 6





No. 7



No. 8



No. 9



No. 10



No. 11

No. 12



No. 13



Pl. 6



No. 14



No. 15



No. 16