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ʻAyn GHazāl Two-Headed Bust at Louvre Abu Dhabi: Exploring Stories of Cultural Connections

Abstract

In 2017, the Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi signed a loan agreement with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan regarding a five-year loan of a two-headed statue from ʻAyn GHazāl to the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum. Since its installation in November 2017, the plaster statue has become one of the most striking pieces welcoming visitors to the first wing of the permanent galleries, which is comprised of five exhibition rooms arranged in a chrono-thematic sequence ranging from the Neolithic period (*ca*. 10,000 BC) to late antiquity (*ca.* 6th–7th centuries AD). Following the renewal of the loan agreement for five additional years in February 2022, Louvre Abu Dhabi continues to display the statue from ʻAyn GHazāl in the "First Villages" gallery. It sparks our interest not only for the enigmatic identity of the twin heads but also for the fabrication techniques involved in its creation, including the use of high-quality lime-plaster technology developed by early agricultural communities during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (PPNB). This paper deals with the history of the twin-headed statue from its discovery in 1985 and will address the various theories regarding its significance and function which have been questioned and requestioned by researchers to this day. The renewed museum practices at Louvre Abu Dhabi will be explored to illustrate how the decompartmentalisation of museum objects impacts the narrative concerning the development of human statuary on a broader chronological and geographical spectrum.

ʻAyn GHazāl Two-Headed Bust in Context

Situated on both banks of the Az Zarqaʾ River in ʻAmmān, Jordan, ʻAyn GHazāl (Spring of the Gazelle) is considered to be one of the largest and most

significant sites for learning about the Early Neolithic populations that occupied the southern Levant during the PPNB period (*ca*. 8600–6500 BC) (Edwards 2016: 59). Archaeological digs carried out between 1982 and 1998 yielded traces of habitation and floral and faunal remains, as well as numerous artefacts that include rich deposits of figurative statues whose human-like features continue to intrigue experts and museum visitors alike. In 1983 and in 1985, an assemblage of more than 30 lime-plaster anthropomorphic statues were unearthed from the Neolithic site of ʿAyn GHazāl.

The use of lime plaster for statuary represents a remarkable evolution that involved the creation of a varied array of statues and figurines of both animals and humans, as well as decorative motifs painted on plastered walls and the floors of dwellings. The human statues generally fall into two different groups, either full-bodied statues or busts with one or two heads. The two-headed bust currently on display at Louvre Abu Dhabi (inv. 19612, also referred to as bust #5/6) is presented in an upright position. The figure measures 88cm in height, 48.5cm in width, and 19.5cm in diameter, and weighs 30 kg (FIG. 1). This specimen is regarded as "monumental" when compared to other contemporary sculptures, which generally measure up to 35 cm in height. It is structurally in good condition and was restored in the 1990s at the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Analytical Laboratory in Washington, D.C. (Grissom 1996: 70–75).

Two heads with elongated necks rest on a featureless, almost two-dimensional bust. The faces are enlivened with stylised facial features. The large almond-shaped eyes are underlined with black bitumen. The eyes are marked by diamond-shaped pupils, which adds to the figure a peculiar and outlandish appearance. Above the forehead, there is a protruding peripheral incision. This feature may have served to affix a headdress in a different material (Grissom 2000: 43). Brows and cheekbones are discreetly modelled. The appearance of the two heads is characterised by an upturned small nose with nostrils and a thin mouth defined by a simple line.

The hollow figure once possessed an armature, now entirely disintegrated, made of reed and twig bundles tied with twine, around which plaster was added to obtain the desired form. Experimental archaeology research shows that reeds had to be fresh to be easily bent into bundles neatly arranged to form the armature or "skeleton" of the statue (Grissom 2000: 29).

The two-headed bust belongs to a group of 32 statues unearthed from two different caches at the ʿAyn GHazāl site. All statues were found carefully buried in two separate pits dug through the floors of abandoned dwellings (Rollefson 1983: 29). The statue (#5/6) was discovered on the last day of the 1984 excavation season in Cache 2 with six other anthropomorphic statues. It was not until the return of archaeologists to ʿAmmān for the following season in 1985 that the statues were examined closely. The conservators on site recommended disinterring the cache using the "block-lifting" technique, which prevented causing any further damage and potentially preserved contextual data for analysis. Despite the harsh weather conditions of summer and damage inflicted by bulldozers passing over the site during the construction of a modern highway in 1974, the two blocks were recovered in relatively good condition, though the upper layer of Cache 2 from 1985 seems to have suffered considerable damage, probably due to breakage

in antiquity. After extraction, the Cache 1 block from 1983 (25 statues) was sent to London for conservation, while the Cache 2 block (7 statues) was analysed and consolidated at the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Analytical Laboratory in Washington, D.C., from 1983 to 1993.

While the lime-plaster statues differ in form and size, they share an identical archaeological context (Rollefson, Simmons, and Kafafi 1992: 466). They were generally piled in two different pits underneath abandoned structures, in an east-west orientation, lying on either their faces or backs. The figures have similar stylised human traits and featureless limbs and torsos. Radiocarbon dating using charcoal samples found near the plaster assemblage indicates that Cache 1 from 1983 dates around 6750 ± 80 BC (Rollefson and Simmons 1985: 48), while Cache 2 from 1985 dates around 6570 ±110 BC (Rollefson and Simmons 1987a: 95–96). The difference of over two hundred years denotes a consistency in statue production and burial.

During uninterrupted periods of occupation, the agricultural settlement expanded over an area of 30 acres and supported a population estimated at around 2,500 to 3,000 people (Rollefson and Simmons 1987: 38–43). ʿAyn GHazāl reached its zenith of cultural development around the middle of the 6th millennium BC. One of the notable technological advancements was the invention of lime-plaster technology. Humans invented plaster, a new material created by sourcing elements found in nature: powdered marl, limestone, and vegetable fibres. Between 7500 and 5500 BC, high-quality plaster was manufactured on an industrial scale for floor construction, wall and floor covering, and the manufacture of smaller objects, such as modelled human skulls, statuary, jewellery, and tokens. Archaeological data reveal that natural resources such as wood were extensively exploited, consequently resulting in irrevocable changes in the ecosystem. Unable to sustain the demands of growing populations, many south Levantine settlements were abandoned by the end of the 7th millennium BC (Rollefson and Kohler-Rollefson 1989: 73–86).

The two-headed bust loaned by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities is mounted in a large showcase centred in the first gallery of Wing 1, titled the "First Villages" (FIG. 2). This introductory room recounts the rapid political, social, technological, and economic upheavals that occurred among the prehistoric communities across continents. Referred to as the "Neolithic Revolution" (Childe 1934: 23), this phenomenon is explored via three key themes:

- Sedentarisation, the practice of agriculture and livestock breeding resulting in gradual cultural advances and technological evolution. The establishment of a new economy based on agricultural production consequently led to the shaping of clay into various vessels, sometimes decorated, for the purpose of cooking, storage, and food consumption.
- Crafting utilitarian tools and vessels developed into the manufacture of delicate and decorated objects using relatively rare and fine materials, such as jade. Such objects were not intended for functional use but to embody spiritual beliefs or indicate the social status of their owners, hence marking the rise of social stratification.
- Concomitant with sedentism, societal and technological advances

> dramatically altered the relationship between the Neolithic people and their surrounding environment. It was defined by progressively building the ability to manipulate and exploit available natural resources. The fertility of the land upon which they lived became a great concern, as the survival of a settlement heavily depended on bountiful harvests and accessibility to resources. This concern manifested in the proliferation of female figurines with accentuated physical attributes, often interpreted by researchers as symbols of fertility.

Self-perception and self-expression similarly evolved to encompass a broader variety of human representations materialising in the appearance of reliefs, figurines, and statues that could be evidence of ancestral veneration and/or divine worship. Within this context, a careful display of one of the earliest monumental human figures in the first room of the permanent galleries sheds light on the possible interpretations of its function and highlights the importance it once occupied within the village of ʿAyn GHazāl. It stands alongside other statuettes from various cultures that were selected by the museum curators to illustrate the development of human figuration from the Neolithic period to the Early Bronze Age.

Anthropomorphic Analogies in Ancient Eastern Art

Cache 2 at the site of ʿAyn GHazāl constitutes an intriguing innovation highlighted by the introduction of two-headed busts. In addition to the specimen in question, two other genderless busts with two heads emerging from the torso were found in the second cache. Two-headed statuary is by no means an isolated or a unique occurrence at the ʿAyn GHazāl site. Parallels in Near Eastern art provide various examples of anthropomorphic figurines portrayed with two heads. Noteworthy comparisons are the double-headed statuettes and large reliefs in Neolithic Çatal Hüyük (first half of the 6th millennium BC), disc-shaped idols from Kültepe in central Anatolia (late 3rd millennium BC), and the alabaster figurines from Tall Brak in Syria (3500–3300 BC).

Located next to the ʿAyn GHazāl statue showcase at Louvre Abu Dhabi is another display showcase equally dedicated to the development of human figuration (FIG. 3). It widens the scope through the presentation of nine small figurines originating from different cultures around the world. The showcase presents a range of female and male figures created between 6500 BC and 1700 BC. At the time that this paper is being written, it includes, from right to left: a female figure from the Tall Halaf site in Syria, two female Valdivia figurines from Ecuador, a couple of male and female figurines from Afghanistan, a Predynastic female figurine from Egypt, a "Bactrian Princess" statuette from Bactria in Central Asia, a plank idol with two heads from Cyprus, and finally a Cycladic female figurine from Greece.

Out of the nine figures in this showcase, the Cypriot idol (FIGS. 4 and 5) from the Louvre Abu Dhabi collection (LAD 2011.025) constitutes a viable analogy. This terracotta figurine, also known as plank idol, is characteristic of human representation forms that developed in Cyprus and Anatolia during the 3rd millennium BC. With an iconography similar to the ʿAyn GHazāl busts (FIG. 6), this plank idol features two rectangular heads sharing an almost two-dimensional body (27.9 cm in height). The elongated heads are joined

at the top. The idol is distinguished by highly stylised facial features reduced to only two dots for eyes, perforated ears, and a small protruding nose. The front and back of the figure are covered with incised geometric elements that could suggest garments, tattoos, or decorative scarification. Although a few specimens were found in domestic settings, most figurines whose identities are unknown come from tombs (Webb 2015: 242). Therefore, they are perhaps linked to funerary rituals to accompany the deceased members of the community.

ʿAyn GHazāl Statues: Usage and Significance

Despite the archaeological context being known, the meaning behind these human representations is yet to be unravelled. However, based on the data collected from the site, several theories have been presented in attempts to answer the following question: What is the exact purpose of the ʿAyn GHazāl statues?

Made up of villagers, farmers, and stockbreeders, the inhabitants of PPNB settlements experienced an "explosion of symbolism," as termed by Schmandt-Besserat (1998: 1). It manifested through the making of objects imbued with ideas or beliefs shared by the inhabitants of the settlement. In contrast to small female figurines that were intended for private worship, the uncommonly larger statues were perhaps part of public display and veneration. In addition to their impressive size, well-balanced statues and flat-based busts are believed to have been presented in an upright position in front of walls or dedicated niches. Research conducted at ʿAyn GHazāl indicates that the statues were immediately discarded with care after fulfilling their role in a ritual or a ceremony. The figures are genderless, except for a few exceptions in which female attributes are clearly represented. To attain further individualisation and realism, partial clothing, accessories, and paint may have been added to identify the figures as male or female. Hence, this leads us to the second question: Who did the statues depict? Do they represent mythical individuals, revered deities, or honoured ancestors?

The ʿAyn GHazāl statues share traits in common with a group of modelled human skulls and fragmentary lime-plaster statues created around reed armature found at two other important PPNB sites: at Jericho, Palestine, (*ca*. 6700–6500 BC) and at Nahal Hemar cave on the western shore of the Dead Sea (*ca*. 6300 BC) (Garstang 1935: 166–167, pls. 51–53; Cauvin 1972: 157; Goren, Segal, and Bar-Yosef 1993: 120–131; Tubb and Grissom 1995: 445–446; Bar-Yosef and Alon 1998: 20–21).

Evidence of decapitation and cranial modelling was also found at ʿAyn GHazāl. A total of 13 plastered skulls (Rollefson 2014: 312) from the Middle PPNB have been found to date. After removal of the lower jaw, plaster was employed to cover the human skull. This may illustrate a cultic practice related to ancestral worship. Stylistically, the skulls were modelled with the same elongated eyes and upturned noses as the plaster statues at ʿAyn GHazāl. This theory, however, does not explain the existence of two-headed figures in the cache.

A different hypothesis posits that the statues may represent divine beings, considering the monumentality of the figures and the abnormalities of their human features. Namely, these features include twin heads with a joint torso, disproportionally large eyes, and six

toes or seven fingers in some statues. Building upon a theory first proposed by Garstang and then Kenyon (Kenyon 1957: 84–85): the two sets of three fragmentary plaster figures found in Jericho could be interpreted as a representation of a divine triad consisting of a male, a female, and a child. The material at ʿAyn GHazāl does not corroborate this theory. Yet, the presence of figures with female attributes in the caches may support the depiction of fertility goddesses.

It has been speculated that the practices documented at the site could signify the early development of cult practices devoted to mythical ancestors. For example, the inhabitants of the settlement may have regarded the two-headed statue as the embodiment of a mythical couple who were associated with protection, fertility, and abundance. Alternatively, the statues could also be interpreted as the chosen medium to honour effigies of ancestors, perhaps of those who founded the settlement and contributed to its growth and prosperity.

Conclusion

While current archaeological data reveal little about the identity and functions of the statues, we can certainly state that plaster statuary developed into a tradition that was maintained and handed down from generation to generation. Associated with agriculture, the figures possibly participated in ceremonies, which generated a feeling of territorial rootedness and a sense of belonging that united the first communities of ʿAyn GHazāl.

The substantial presence of twin-headed human representation appears to be a commonality among PPNB agricultural societies in the Near East and it continued to develop over successive millennia. Moreover, the assemblage of ʿAyn GHazāl statues reflects how communities formed a collective identity and decided to partake in ceremonies and rites, thus marking a transition from private worship practiced in a domestic setting to ceremonies carried out in public.

From a museum perspective, Louvre Abu Dhabi recounts a story common to all humanity. By decompartmentalising civilisational barriers, a renewed curation allows the display of group of artefacts, produced by seemingly distant cultures, inside a shared showcase. When placed together, these objects stimulate a re-evaluation of our history and contribute to forming "cultural dialogues" among the works. This may entail drawing comparisons of forms, techniques, influences, myths, notions, as well as noting dissimilarities. Concurrently, we should be cognisant of the plurality of views and identities expressed in the presented works and by the visitors. As the first universal museum in the region, Louvre Abu Dhabi invites its visitors to contemplate the individual and collective identities that transcend time and space.

Finally, the museum's partnership with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities provided opportunities to conceive educational tools (podcast, audio guide, label, learning resources, etc.) to promote Jordan's rich heritage to a wider public. This cultural and scientific cooperation was cemented through a joint restoration project which was launched in 2018 with the restoration of an ʿAyn GHazāl statue called *Heifah* (JMA 217), housed in the Jordan Museum. The restoration took place in the laboratory of the Jordan Museum to consolidate a significant artefact that was displayed and loaned several times for temporary exhibitions and preserve it for posterity.

1. Monumental statue with two heads, Jordan, ʿAyn GHazāl, about 6500 BC, plaster, bitumen (eyes); Department of Antiquities, Jordan, inv. 19612 (photo copyright Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi).

2. "First Villages", the introductory gallery of Wing 1 at Louvre Abu Dhabi (photo copyright Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi; photo by Greg Garay).

3. Showcase dedicated to the development of human figuration at Louvre Abu Dhabi (photo copyright Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi; photo by Greg Garay).

4. Plank idol with two heads (front), Cyprus, 2300–1900 BC, polished and incised terracotta; Louvre Abu Dhabi, LAD 2011.025 (photo copyright Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi; photo by Thierry Ollivier).

5. Plank idol with two heads (back), Cyprus, 2300–1900 BC, polished and incised terracotta; Louvre Abu Dhabi, LAD 2011.025 (photo copyright Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi; photo by Thierry Ollivier).

6. ʿAyn GHazāl two-headed bust and plank idol exhibited in the first gallery of the Louvre Abu Dhabi (photo copyright Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi; photo by Greg Garay)

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The New Dushara Sanctuary at Al Maḥāfīr in Petra

Abstract

The present article describes a newly discovered Nabataean sanctuary at Al Maḥāfīr in Petra (northern part of Jabal An Nijr). It is the first time that an eye-idol has been found together with an inscription of Dushara, the supreme god of the Nabataeans. In addition to this report an interpretation is offered about the relationship of this Sanctuary to the Great High Place (Al Madhbaḥ) on Jabal Aṭ Ṭaff. In this study, M. Alfaqeer is responsible for the discovery of the sanctuary and the reading of the inscription, whereas K. Schmitt-Korte discusses the possible relationship between both sanctuaries.

Location

The most outstanding features of Petra are no doubt the famous rock tombs. Another much less spectacular group of monuments are the sanctuaries that were chiseled into the rocks at various places in and around Petra. They have been extensively described by G. Dalman (1908 and 1912). Some years later G. L. Robinson counted 11 high places (Robinson 1930). A few more monuments have been found since and they are likely not the last.

The new sanctuary consists of an unfinished altar, an eye-idol with an inscription, and a fairly small platform with a number of symbols (petroglyphs). The location of the new sanctuary is not easy to describe. In the south of Petra there are two mountains in the region between Al KHaznah and the theater. To the west, it is Jabal Aṭ Ṭaff with the famous Great High Place (Al Madhbaḥ); to the east, Jabal An Nijr with the Dushara Sanctuary. Both mountains are separated by the steep valley Wādī Al Maḥāfīr.

From a starting point near the theater the steps go up towards the obelisks and Al Madhbaḥ. At the top of these steps,