

Iwona Zych

Note on the Collection of Wooden Finds from Naqlun

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 10, 145-148

1999

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

NOTE ON THE COLLECTION OF WOODEN FINDS FROM NAQLUN

Iwona Zych

Since the beginning of excavations at Naqlun, the collection of wooden finds from the site has accrued to some 400 recorded objects. The importance of these finds lies not so much in the value of individual pieces – although there have been some exceptional objects, like the ivory inlaid casket from site D¹⁾ – but by and large in their structural and functional connection with the places where they were found. The present study season was

devoted to reviewing, verifying and completing wherever necessary the basic documentation of the finds, combined with day-to-day recording of newly discovered objects.²⁾

Despite the fact that not all the material was available for review this year,³⁾ some preliminary remarks on the collection can be made, concerning its general characteristics, the species of wood used, the provenience and chronology of particular finds.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

A major part of the assemblage is made up of structural elements, like beams and planks, and door and window frames.⁴⁾ Some of the registered planks are carved or painted with floral or geometric motifs; incidentally, painted geometric ornaments can still be seen on the boards of the ceiling in the historic Church of the Archangel Gabriel inside the contemporary monastery complex. Another plank, which is preserved whole, came from a wooden staircase; a study of the various holes drilled in the board and still surviving pegs indicates that it had been used probably as the riser part of a step.

Excavations in 1999 under the floor of the church on Kom A⁵⁾ brought to light an interesting assemblage of wooden structural elements, stored (?) in a bin, perhaps for reuse. The finds comprised blocks of wood with tongue-and-groove joints, forming a frame for paneling, such as is used in wooden doors; several panels have also been found. Similar elements had already appeared inside one of the units of the building on site D. The elements bear a close resemblance to intricate door paneling known from other examples of ancient doors from Coptic buildings in Old Cairo or Wadi an-Natrun.⁶⁾

¹⁾ Cf. W. Godlewski, *PAM III, Reports 1992* (1993), 51.

²⁾ I am indebted to Prof. Dr. Włodzimierz Godlewski for permission to publish this material and for his continuous encouragement without which this task would not have been accomplished.

³⁾ I have been able to review the material from the 1991-1998 seasons, which is found in the expedition stores on the site. The objects from the 1986-1990 seasons will be studied in the stores of the Coptic Museum in Cairo at a future date.

⁴⁾ Leeway should be made for the as yet unidentified pieces, which in any case may never be attributed to any of the categories in view of a lack of distinct characteristics. These constitute about a fifth of the collection at present.

⁵⁾ See report by W. Godlewski in the present volume.

⁶⁾ Cf. "Woodworking, Coptic", in: *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, Aziz S. Atiya (ed), cols. 2331ff.

A frequent find are wedges of wood. They must have been generally useful in the building process, as indicated by one *in situ* find, where a wedge was found inserted between the drum of a column and its base.⁷⁾

Another extremely frequent find (close to 90 objects) are all kinds of pegs, which are worked more or less carefully, straight and hooked, long and short, but always sharpened at one end for inserting into holes in the wall. The other end may be either simple or (rarely) worked in a knob. That at least some of these objects were used as part of the functional arrangement of the interior has been proved by a peg

found still sticking out from a plastered wall inside one of the hermitages in the Naqlun hills.⁸⁾

One of the units in the complex uncovered on Kom D (D.29) yielded four racks with three and more pegs for hanging all sorts of objects, the racks obviously intended for suspending on a wall.

Of considerable interest is the set of locks, sliding keys and bolts (altogether over 30 objects) that has come to light in the various units of the building on Kom D (*Fig. 1*) The outer lock casings come in various sizes, from quite small (c. 13 cm long) to fairly big (c. 28 cm long), and some of them are carved with simple geo-

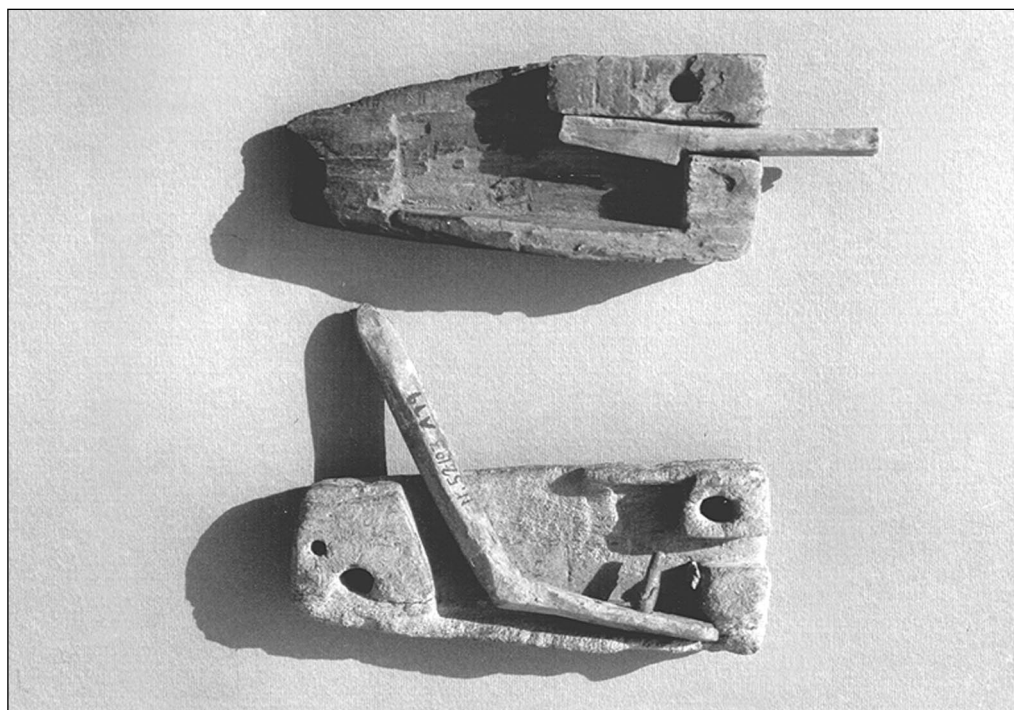


Fig. 1. Examples of wooden locks, keys and bolts from Kom D (top: N.99049 and N.99050, bottom: N.93052 and 93059 (Photo W. Godlewski)

⁷⁾ Personal communication of W. Godlewski.

⁸⁾ Hermitage no. 2, peg Nd.87142, with some 13.5 cm of the length hidden inside the wall, and the remaining 5 cm projecting to serve as a hook.

metrical patterns. The bolts and keys follow the typical shape for each category, varying only in size and the number and pattern of teeth and holes respectively. With regard to the keys, it is interesting to note a certain scope for individuality in the basic form, with some examples having a knob carved at the top of the handle and pierced handles to hold a loop cord (one example with remains of the linen cord still in place). The part of the sliding key with teeth represents at least three variants of the locking system.⁹⁾

A single piece found this year is evidence for wooden screens, similar to those known from 6th-to-8th century Baouit. A few carved elements may have originally decorated some furniture pieces. They are few, however, and since they were made on the whole of a good hard wood, there is some reason to believe that their presence here has little to do with furniture as such. They may have been reused in the workshops on Kom D, perhaps as an "anvil" of sorts for the punching or cutting of softer materials like leather, for instance.

This brings us to another sizable category – tools and utilitarian objects of all kinds. Wooden handles are prolific, obviously being most likely to be broken and discarded. Also found are parts of clamping rings of wood, primitive "pulleys" used with pack saddles, knives, rods, a pin and needle for making mats, a paddle, a spool and weaving accessories, spindles and whorls (found mostly in burial contexts), a chopper perhaps and something that could have been the handle of a string instrument (Nd.98117). Three

stoppers of various size point to the need of plugging openings of some kind.

A very special find from unit D.15 is a small press (N.92035), consisting of a wooden trough (29 x 22 cm, c. 13 cm high) and a cubic stone with all the necessary trappings for it to be moved up and down to press whatever needed to be pressed inside it. The wooden base has a hole in the side for runoff, but otherwise, neither it nor the stone show any evidence of wear, making it difficult to recognize the specific purpose for which it had been used.

One should also mention two pieces discovered this year – made of a fine hard wood – provisionally identified as book covers. The two of them come from D.32, an unit which is in the vicinity of the suggested book-binding workshop uncovered previously,¹⁰⁾ and may thus reinforce the hypothetical function of this part of the complex.

The collection is not without its finer pieces, like the typical wooden combs used in personal hygiene and small boxes that were probably used for some toilet substances. The oval container found this year, decorated on the outside with horizontal stripes of red and fitted with a lid (no longer existing), is astonishingly like the much earlier boxes found at the nearby site of Tebtunis.¹¹⁾

Finally, crosses – a category of finds to be expected at a site like Naqlun. They are, perhaps not surprisingly, relatively rare at the site: two broken pieces come from hermitages 25 and 89 respectively, the rest from various sites on the plateau. There is a small cross that was presumably attached

⁹⁾ Cf., for example, Fl. Petrie, *Tools and Weapons* (London 1917), 59, pl. lxxv.132; E. Dauterman Maguire et al., *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*, *Illinois Byzantine Studies* II (1989), 96.

¹⁰⁾ Cf. W. Godlewski, *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 115-116.

¹¹⁾ I am grateful to Mrs. Sylvie Marchand for kindly showing me the material from the excavations at Tebtunis and discussing some of the finds with me.

to a door (N.93008), a pendant cross, discovered this season (N.99048), a finely ornamented votive cross, unfortunately from a secondary context, also found this year (N.99062). Other examples are frag-

mentarily preserved. From the buildings on Kom D come two pyramid-like bases with truncated tops and deep sockets for mounting an object, perhaps a standing cross.

SPECIES OF WOOD

Prior to examination by a wood specialist, only some very general remarks are possible. As is to be expected, the easily recognized date-palm wood is very common. Tamarisk, sycamore and homegrown acacia, as well as sidder and persea trees have also been identified in macroscopic examination.¹²⁾

It should be remembered that whatever wood was used at Naqlun, it had to be

brought from elsewhere. While the palm and tamarisk could have come from the nearby oasis, the harder species must have come from further afield. There is some reason to believe that at least some of the finer woods found at Naqlun were the result of secondary trade in wood waste, with pieces of good wood being picked up and traded as material to be used for other purposes.

PROVENANCE AND CHRONOLOGY

The picture will be clearer once the entire collection has been studied, but some general remarks are in order here.

In terms of provenance, it is obvious that the absolute majority of the structural elements and the tools come from the site of the building on Kom D and from the combined sites A and E – the church and surrounding houses and street.

A few highly specific pieces, like pen-cases and a gaming pawn (probably quite late), as well as spindles and whorls were found in burial contexts on the site of the cemetery on sites A and E.

The hermitages yielded an unspectacular set of finds on the whole, as far as wood is concerned: mostly pegs, some tool handles, a wedge or two, a plank here and there, some nondescript objects. But there

were also pieces of crosses, a pendant, a needle, fragments of wheels, a text in Greek on a piece of wood.

Characteristically, many of these wooden finds come from pits in the hermitage rooms and thus may be considered as closed deposits to be dated by other finds from these assemblages. Some general dating possibilities are provided by the few burial contexts. The cellar on site E¹³⁾ and the already mentioned bin filled with wooden elements discovered this year on site A also provide tentative dating opportunities based on stratigraphical studies of the site. Otherwise, there are few clues with regard to the chronology in the material itself and the universality of certain forms across time can be fairly misleading.

¹²⁾ For a description of the woods commonly found in Egypt, cf. A. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, 3rd ed. (London 1948), chapter on wood and woodworking, 488-516.

¹³⁾ Cf. Godlewski, *PAM X, Reports 1998*, op. cit., 117.