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# **BULLETIN: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**

## **A Horus-of-Nekhen Statue of Amunhotpe III from Soleb**

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Horus-of-Nekhen Statue of Amunhotpe III. Soleb, reign of Amunhotpe, Dynasty 18.  
*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. 23.1470*

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# A Horus-of-Nekhen Statue of Amunhotpe III from Soleb

WILLIAM KELLY SIMPSON

*Falke, Falke, du wiedergefundener,  
wo führst du mich hin, du kluger Vogel?*

HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*

The Museum of Fine Arts has recently placed on exhibition a large black granite statue of a falcon image (figs. 1–5), and the occasion marks the third time that it has been set up for prospective viewers. The statue was made for the temple of Soleb, downstream of the third cataract in the Sudan, in the reign of Amunhotpe III (1405–1367 B.C.) of Dynasty 18. It was then removed from Soleb, possibly in the reign of Piankhy (751–730 B.C.) of Dynasty 25, and set up in the temple of Napata at Gebel Barkal, downstream of the fourth cataract to the south. Here it probably remained in place in the temple until it was deliberately damaged some time after 15 B.C. The Harvard University–Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, under the late Dr. George A. Reisner, discovered the fragments of the statue near its emplacement in the Barkal Temple, and they were transported to the museum in 1923.<sup>1</sup> The heavy fragments were destined to remain crated for the next forty-five years, not because they were entirely forgotten, but because of priorities assigned to other objects from the excavations in Egypt and the Sudan and the active program of publication of the expedition.

In the course of the preparation of a volume of the records of the expedition in the Sudan, Dows Dunham had occasion to have the fragments uncrated to examine them in detail. I am indebted to Mr. Dunham's work for much of the information in this article. Suzanne E. Chapman of the Egyptian department, with Mr. Dunham's guidance, reconstructed the statue in a set of drawings, restoring the headdress with first three and later four plumes from the fragments (figs. 2, 5). They were next delivered to the Research Laboratory of the museum and placed under the supervision of William J. Young and his assistants, Peter Williams and Merville E. Nichols. The major problem involved the sculpting of a new middle section for the falcon to replace a missing piece, its casting, and the doweling of this section to the base and the upper portion. In addition to this midsection, the major restorations are the beak, portions of the pedestal, and the greater part of the four plumes. In a statue of small scale, these operations would not have been particularly difficult or time consuming. In a major piece such as this, the maneuvering and setting up of extremely heavy, oddly shaped pieces with ropes and chains, the casting of large

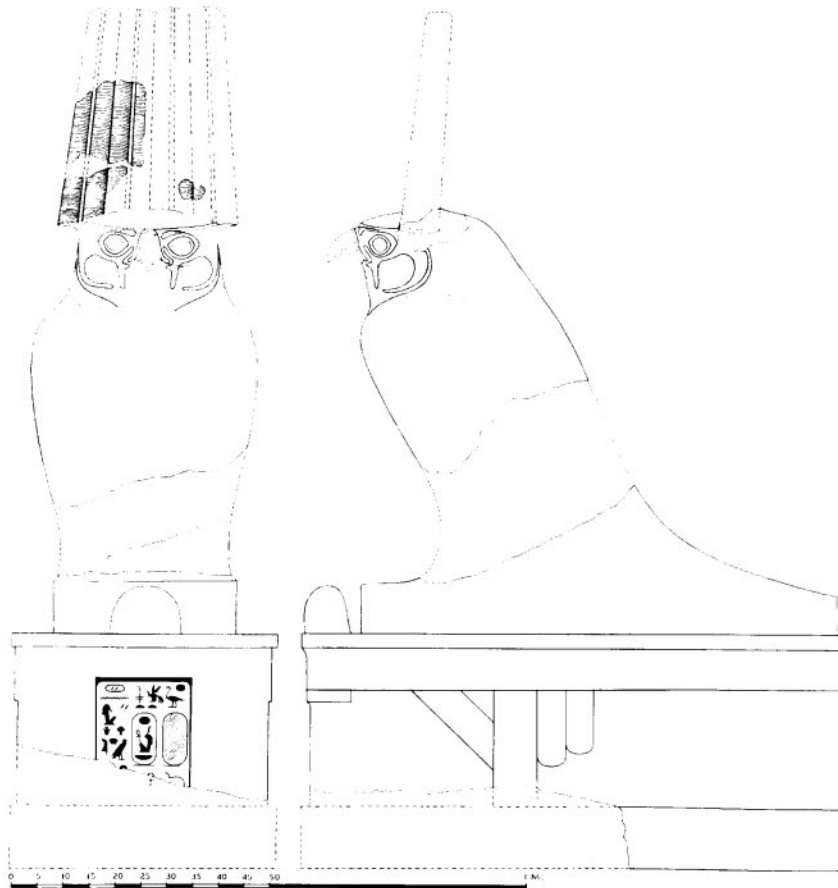
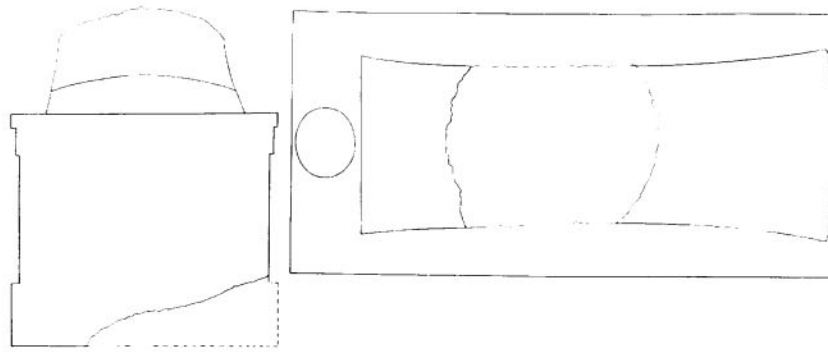


1. Boston falcon: black granite Horus-of-Nekhen statue of Amunhotpe III. Soleb, reign of Amunhotpe III, Dynasty 18. *Harvard University—Museum of Fine Arts Expedition*. 23.1470.



- 2. Boston falcon: detail of head.
- 3. Boston falcon: text on front of base showing effaced cartouche.
- 4. Dows Dunham taking measurements of the Boston falcon prior to restoration.





5. Reconstruction of Boston falcon. (Drawing by Suzanne E. Chapman.)

sections, and the drilling for dowels in an extremely hard stone required the utmost skill and patience and entailed the expenditure of some four hundred hours of labor.<sup>2</sup>

The statue of the falcon image was one of several placed in the temple of Amunhotpe III at Soleb. Many Europeans visited the site during the nineteenth century. Accounts of these early travelers and scholars, and their journals, plans, and copies of inscriptions, have been carefully studied and edited by Michela Schiff Giorgini.<sup>3</sup> The following notes are drawn from her work. The first European visitors to Soleb recorded two falcon statues still in place in the temple. These were set on a platform on either side of the gateway through the great pylon. One was seen by the archaeologist Frédéric Cailliaud in January 1821, for he mentions an avenue of ram sphinxes and falcons in his description of the remains of the temple. But even at this time no site was so remote that visitors did not appear. Two English clergymen, George Waddington and Barnard Hanbury, also visited the ruins to make plans and to copy inscriptions. Their encounter with Cailliaud was noted by Waddington in a somewhat disdainful fashion: "On this spot I met Messrs. Cailliaud and Letorzec with their interpreter and servant. They were both in Turkish dress, most cautiously defended from sand and sun by long muslin shades projecting before their eyes. We merely exchanged a few words of civility in passing, and proceeded on to our respective destinations with as much indifference as if we had met in the park or on the boulevards . . ."

The scholar Linant de Bellefonds visited the site in May and June of 1822 and noted two large-scale granite falcons in front of the great pylon. Lord Prudhoe was among the many other early travelers and visitors. He removed two granite lions to the British Museum and gave Champollion copies of some of the inscriptions at Soleb. A thorough scientific excavation of the temple was undertaken in the 1960's by the Michela Schiff Giorgini Mission under the patronage of the University of Pisa. When its results are published in full, the emplacement and orientation of the falcon statues will be discussed to the extent that it is possible to reconstruct their original setting.

The Boston falcon is one of two found at the Gebel Barkal temple. The base with the lower part of the other in the Berlin Museum (Inv. 1622) was discovered and published by Richard Lepsius (fig. 6).<sup>4</sup> The base is similar and is in almost every way the mate of the Boston falcon, which has an identifying inscription in a rectangle on the front of the base. The middle and right columns read: "The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neb-maat-Re, Son of Re, [Amunhotpe-Ruler of-Thebes], [given], life forever." The second cartouche was effectively erased at the time of the Atenist defacements. The column on the left reads: "[Beloved of] Nekheny, who resides in Khay-em-maat." The latter, the name of the temple of Soleb, identifies the provenience of the statue. The deity is identified as the Nekhenite, an epithet or manifestation of the falcon god Horus as the local god of Nekhen (Hierakonpolis) in Upper Egyptian nome 2. The text on the Berlin statue differs. On either side of the perch projection in front of the falcon are the texts: "The good god Neb-maat-Re, given life" on the left, and "Beloved of Sopdu" on the right. In front within a long cartouche is the titulary: "The good god Neb-maat-Re, Son of Re [Amunhotpe-Ruler-of-Thebes] given life," of which the second cartouche has suffered the Atenist



6. Berlin falcon: Soleb, Dynasty 18.  
 (Drawing from Richard Lepsius,  
*Denkmaeler aus Aegypten  
 und Aethiopien*, Berlin,  
 Nicolaische Buchhandlung, n.d.)

7. Berlin falcon: restored upper half.  
*Staatliche Museen Berlin. Inv. 1622.*







8. Gold falcon head and crown. Hierakonpolis, Dynasty 6. *Egyptian Museum, Cairo.*

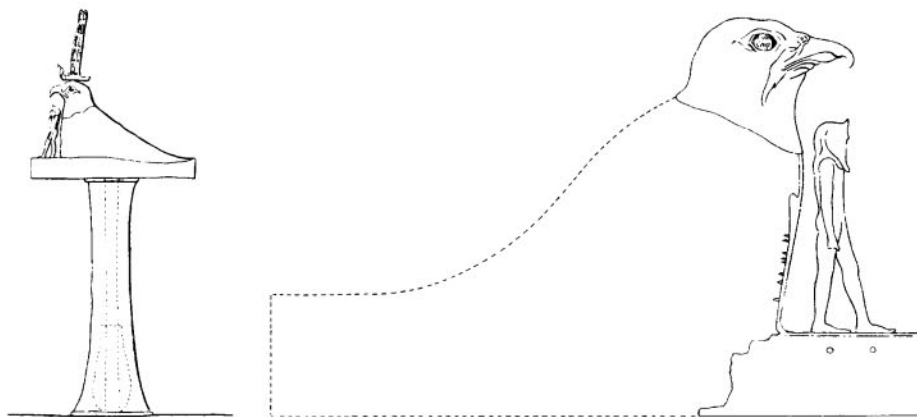
erasure. Similar as the two falcons are, with the possible exception of the head-dresses, the one in Boston honors the Nekhenite and the one in Berlin, the god Sopdu.<sup>5</sup>

The Boston statue was discovered by Reisner in the court of the Barkal temple designated as B 502 (Area III-4). B 502 is a section of the temple built in the reign of Piankhy, and there is therefore a likelihood that the Soleb statues were transported southward for the Barkal temple during his reign or soon thereafter.<sup>6</sup> The fragments of the feathers of the headdress were found in B 900. At the same time the serpent statue in Boston dedicated to the goddess Serket by Amunhotpe III was also removed from Soleb to Barkal, as well as some of the ram sphinxes.<sup>7</sup> At the temple of Sanam across the river from Barkal were found heads in grey granite of large serpent statues similar to those from Soleb, as well as the head of a vulture, all deriving with some likelihood from Soleb and probably removed at the same time.<sup>8</sup> The Great Temple of Barkal was thus not only enlarged from its Dynasty 18 origins by the Kushite rulers of Dynasty 25 and their descendants, but a considerable number of major pieces of sculpture were expropriated from Soleb for the Kushite kings.

The Boston falcon has such an absorbing history that there is a danger of losing sight of the object itself in the accounts of the early travelers and the peregrinations of the falcon itself. The statue is actually not a falcon at all in the sense that the falcons in front of the temple of Edfu are:<sup>9</sup> the Boston statue is a statue of a statue of a falcon. The prototype is the sacred image of the falcon at Nekhen, in which the legs of the bird are sheathed in a kind of wrapping with the tail feathers concealed in the same encasement and not shown crossing each other in the usual fashion.<sup>10</sup> The hieroglyphs show the same differentiation between the falcon (Gardiner Sign List G 5 through 10) and the archaic image of the falcon (Sign List G 11 through 13).<sup>11</sup> Our statue with its plumes corresponds to the hieroglyph of Sign List G 13, which is used for the god Horus of Nekhen and the god Sopdu. The statue recalls the image assigned to Dynasty 6 found at Hierakonpolis, with falcon head and plumes in gold, reconstructed with its base by the excavators (figs. 8-9).<sup>12</sup>

King and falcon are closely associated in the royal cult. The falcon with outstretched wings protects the king in the great statue of Chephren in Cairo and a fragmentary statue head of Mycerinus in Boston (27.1466). In several sculptures the king is shown as a man in front but changing into a falcon in the rear.<sup>13</sup> In the dogma of the kingship, the king is the god Horus who has taken possession of the kingship from his predecessor, identified as Osiris. Thus with falcon garments or falcon protection, the king is closely associated with Horus and other falcon deities.

The statue from Soleb is a magnificent achievement in sculptural expression. The restored beak, the estimated angle and height of the plumes, and the angle of the back are the only uncertain places in the reconstruction and do not materially affect the general impression of the piece. The basic effect is that of simple volumetric form expressed in a hard, highly polished material. The encasement of the wings, legs, and feet and the corresponding absence of these details suggest the power and mystery of the god. The harsh unblinking eyes with the low relief markings around them are in the best tradition of Egyptian animal sculpture, for which Egyptian art is justly famous. The plumes, restored with the inclusion of fragments



9. Reconstruction of Hierakonpolis falcon. (Drawing after J. E. Quibell and F. W. Green. *Hierakonpolis*, London, Bernard Quaritch, 1902, vol. 2, pl. 47.)

of the original, provide a subtle contrast between the feathers and the smooth volumetric surface of the body.

Animal portraiture from the point of view of the art historian presents a particular set of problems, especially in forms as simplified as our great falcon. Its simplicity is not a primitive one, nor is it the product of a highly individualized artist. We must conceive of it as one of a series of like falcons set up in the temple at Soleb and executed by a workshop at the same time. Yet this workshop was the atelier of a master sculptor with numerous, specialized assistants. The design for the final product would have been submitted to the most rigorous scrutiny and the approval of the artist and his superiors. Large blocks of stone were costly, difficult to work, and onerous to transport. In the reign of Amunhotpe III the production of these workshops was phenomenal. Soleb alone could boast of a series of falcons, a series of serpent (uraeus) statues, and an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes, not to mention the other statuary. At Thebes the activity was all the more hectic. Auguste Mariette estimated that some 572 large-scale seated statues of the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet were dedicated by Amenhotpe III in the temple of Mut alone. These Sekhmet statues, of which the Museum of Fine Arts possesses one complete and one of which the upper half is preserved, lack some of the immediate appeal of the falcon because of the abundance of detail.<sup>14</sup> The fierce and yet majestic furrowed head of the best of these is a more complex achievement than the stark and majestic stare of the falcon. In fact, the sculptural success of the falcon from the point of view of the modern viewer lies precisely in the intense simplicity of form, the beauty of the stone, and the surface polish. In this respect it is akin to the earliest predynastic sculptures<sup>15</sup> and to the work of such modern sculptors as Arp and Brancusi. The fact that the falcon is really a statue of an image also brings it into the same realm, but not the same spirit, as the artists of the present century who have tried similar experiments. The falcon is an extremely serious piece of sculpture in spite of the apparent absurdity of its crown. For the bird to be shown as a wrapped image with no indication of its feathers except for the markings around its eyes is one matter. For it to wear an impractical crown which represents a gold original based on four rigid, stylized ostrich feathers is another matter indeed. Yet the absurdity of the bird balancing a crown of feathers from another bird does not strike us as noteworthy any more than it did the ancient Egyptians. As a sacred image, the falcon of Nekhen wears the appropriate divine regalia.

In the Boston falcon the line, volume, and surface treatment are of paramount importance. The weight of the block seems to make itself felt in a positive way: heaviness for the sake of emphasizing majesty and significance, not heaviness in the sense of being cumbersome or inept. The traditional facial markings of the bird are firmly but not deeply indicated. The eyes are slightly oval with strong rims and no indication of the tear duct in the inner corners. The standard on which the falcon image rests is the traditional processional carrying device representing a plank of wood supported by a pole and cross piece. Two streamers hang from behind the vertical pole, and a kind of nub with an extension below the horizontal

stand is set in front. Hence we have a granite rendering of a carpenter's structure, the time honored ensign on which the nome symbols and divine emblems were carried from the earliest dynastic times.<sup>16</sup>

In stressing the simplicity of the volumetric form, I do not mean to imply a lack of sophistication. Many useful comparisons can be made with other falcon statues. The archaic stone falcon in the Guennol Collection, despite its modest size, is a primitive yet powerful presence (fig. 10). It has been suggested that it rocked back and forth on a stand to render the decision of an oracle.<sup>17</sup> Other small early dynastic and predynastic falcon statuettes and amulets partake of the same feeling. Often without legs, they have a squared-off tail without the crossed-over tail feathers of later examples. They belong to quite a different realm of sculpture. The Soleb falcon is basically smoother and elegant, although it retains the primitive feeling of the archaic image.

In human portraiture youth, age, beauty, ugliness, seriousness, humor, nobility, cruelty, and a host of characteristics and emotions can be conveyed. In animal portraiture it is possible to read into the drawing or sculpture, either by the pose or facial configuration, like qualities: the fierceness of the lion, the grace of the gazelle, the power of the wild ox, the fear of an animal hunted by his enemies. With this falcon image the range of variation is considerably reduced and restricted, and yet



10. Predynastic nodding falcon. *Guennol Collection*. L65.2. (Photo Brooklyn Museum, Courtesy A. B. Martin.)

the qualities that stand out are a kind of seriousness and majesty, and even haughtiness or pride. On the other hand, the expression can be viewed as essentially emotionless. Just as the falcon can be compared with the smaller, much earlier Guennol piece, so it can be contrasted with the later green falcon group in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 12).<sup>18</sup> The latter wears the double crown and protects the diminutive king standing between its legs. The eyes bulge with the tear duct shown, the eye sockets are deep, and there is a furrow above the beak. The traditional markings around the eyes are curiously missing, and the sculptor conveys the features of the head and face more by modeling. The statue appears to be larger than it really is because of the relative size of the standing king. He seems lost beneath the protecting breast of the bird. The wings, legs, and claws are all articulated.

Although there are countless representations of falcon deities in sculpture, relief, and painting throughout the span of Egyptian history, particularly in numerous bronzes, the statue of the archaic image of the Nekhenite in Boston ranks among the finest examples. Its closest parallels, other than its companion statues from Soleb, are the stone sculptures at the temple of Edfu (fig. 11). But it can be usefully compared to such diverse representations from as widely separated periods as the predynastic falcon in the Guennol Collection in Brooklyn and the falcon of Nectanebo II of Dynasty 30 in the Metropolitan Museum, an interval of nearly three thousand years. Our new sculpture is an imposing presence, and it is unlikely that the Egyptian department of the Boston Museum will again acquire a sculpture of this size and monumentality.

#### NOTES

1. Dows Dunham, *The Barkal Temples* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1971), p. 25, pls. 24, 25, fig. 20; "Unique Egyptian Sculpture of a Falcon is Reconstructed," *Archaeology* 24 (1971), 272–273; "Department of Egyptian Art," *The Museum Year: 1968. The Ninety-third Annual Report of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, pp. 35–36. The statue is accessioned as MFA 23.1470. Listed by George A. Reisner, "Inscribed Monuments from Gebel Barkal," *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache* 66 (1931), 81, item 11, among earlier pieces in the Barkal temples. Cited in William Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 153 and 273, nn. 36–37; Bertha Porter and Rosalind L. B. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927–1951), vol. 7, p. 219, no. 35. Reisner believed the statues were still in place at the time of King Netekamun (ca. 15 B.C.). However, Mr. Dunham points out to me that the falcon may have been broken up during the raid on Nepata by Psamtik III or Cambyses around 525 B.C., as Reisner earlier suggested in "The Barkal Temples in 1916," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeol-*

*ogy* 4 (1917), 216–217. The two main possibilities for the date of the destruction are the raids of Psamtik III, Cambyses, and the later raid of Petronius. The last of the Kushite statues broken presumably at the same time is one of Aspelta (593–568 B.C.), and hence the destruction most likely followed his reign. The falcons were set up in an extension of the temple under Piankhy and so may have been transported there by him. However, a red granite lion from Soleb is reinscribed by King Amanislo (ca. 280–265 B.C.), and this may suggest that it was he who was responsible for the transportation of the statues. The "Soleb" serpent heads from Sanam (see below) were found in a structure of Taharqa. The Boston falcon measures 1.72 m. high in restoration with its base. Length of base at top, 1.06 m.; width of base at top, 0.525 m.; height of base at top, 0.470 m.; length of base at bottom, 1.023 m.; length of bird at bottom, 0.925 m.; width of bird at base in front, 0.352 m.; width of bird at base in back, 0.380 m.; height of bird to top of head, 0.790 m.; height of bird to top of feathers, 1.210 m.; width of bird over shoulders, 0.410 m.; width of feather crown at base, 0.335 m.



- 11. Ptolemaic falcon. Temple of Edfu.  
(Photo Marburg.)
- 12. Nectanebo II as divine falcon. Dynasty 30.  
*Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund. 34.21.*
- 13. Wood falcon on stand. Late period.  
*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*  
*Gift of Miss Mary S. Ames. 11.1503.*  
(Photo Lawrence Gill III.)

