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## A Forked Staff from Tell Basta

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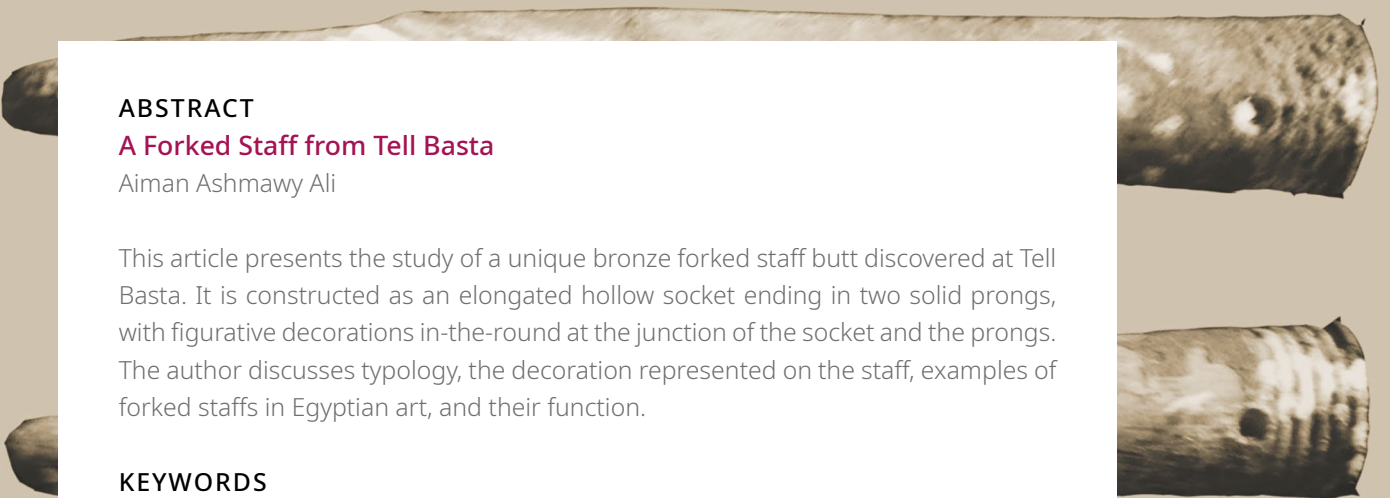
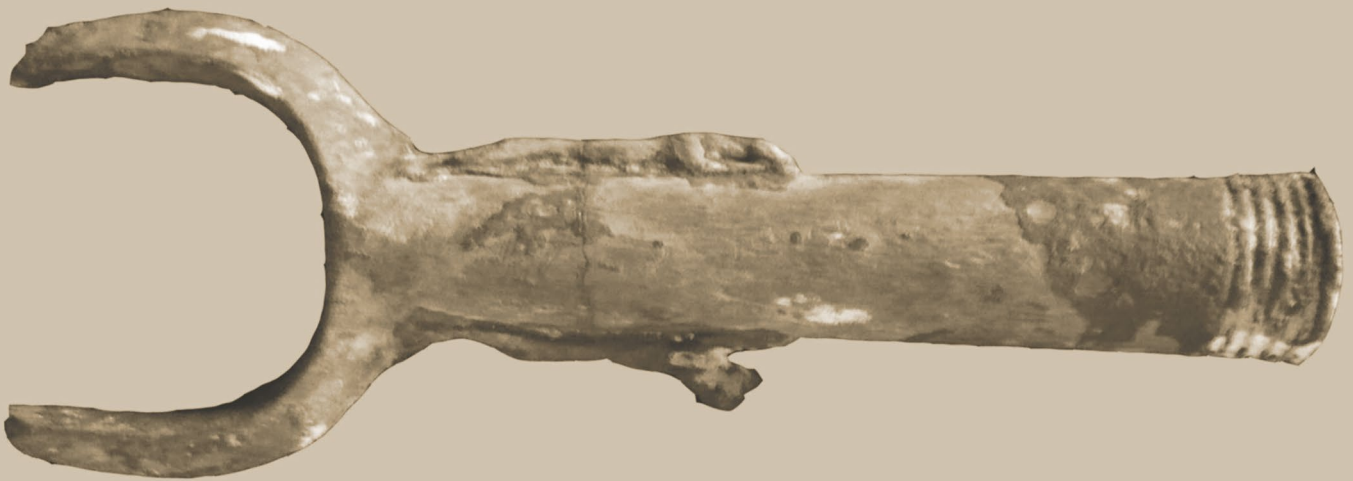
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#### ABSTRACT

#### A Forked Staff from Tell Basta

Aiman Ashmawy Ali

This article presents the study of a unique bronze forked staff butt discovered at Tell Basta. It is constructed as an elongated hollow socket ending in two solid prongs, with figurative decorations in-the-round at the junction of the socket and the prongs. The author discusses typology, the decoration represented on the staff, examples of forked staffs in Egyptian art, and their function.

#### KEYWORDS

Forked butts, Tell Basta, dogs, lions, staff

# A Forked Staff from Tell Basta

<sup>1</sup> During the excavations of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in the northern part of Tell Basta, a large cemetery was discovered that was in use from the Old Kingdom until the Late Period. This cemetery contained the tombs of the governors of Bubastis and high officials of the state, among which are two viceroys of Kush who were born in this city<sup>1</sup>. Among the metal objects discovered in the cemetery were four bronze forked staffs that were discovered by Farid between 1961 and 1964, during his excavation in the New Kingdom and Late Period cemeteries in the northern part of Tell Basta. Unfortunately, the results of his work were never published, but we do know that they were all found either within tombs or in the debris next to them. They all had a simple forked shape, apart from one that is a unique piece, decorated in-the-round not previously known for such objects.

**Source:** Tell Basta, excavation of Farid, 1961 (Figs. 1. 2 a), inv. no. B1332

**Measurements:** 15 cm long

**Date:** late New Kingdom

**Material:** bronze

**Place of preservation:** SCA Archaeological Magazine at Tell Basta

## Description

<sup>2</sup> The object under discussion is a bronze forked staff in the form of an elongated hollow socket ending in two solid prongs, with figurative decoration in-the-round at the junction of the socket and the prongs. The decoration consists of a running lion on one side and a dog represented in the normal reclining position on the other. At the end of the socket, there are two parallel holes for a nail with five parallel rows of incisions that may represent a decorative element like a rope pattern. This design is made to mimic the rope that would have bound the bronze butt onto a wooden shaft. The staff was found broken and was subsequently restored.

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<sup>1</sup> Gauthier 1928; Habachi 1957, 97–102; Farid 1964; van Siclen III 1991; Bakr 1992; Auenmüller 2015, 354–357.



1

Fig. 1: Bronze forked staff, Tell Basta, B1332 (scale 1 : 2)

3 Unfortunately, this object was not published at the time, but we do know that it was found by Farid in 1961 during his excavations at Tell Basta, recovered from debris to the east of tomb 1130. It is thought that the staff belonged to the family tomb of Iuty, a judge and governor of Tell Basta from the Ramesside Period.

## Discussion

### Decoration of the Staff

4 Among the different decorations for this type of object are modelled elements either in relief or sculpted in-the-round. Two main motifs of decoration were known for this type. These are the God Bes and the bovine head, both regarded as symbols of protection<sup>2</sup>. The God Bes was the protector of children and mothers during birth and protector of men against evil, while the cow's head was regarded by William J. Cherf as a representation of the Goddess Isis or Hathor, both of whom were protectors of the child God Horus in the Delta marshes as well as protectors from snakes<sup>3</sup>.

5 The decoration on the Tell Basta staff adds two new motifs that are not previously connected to the idea of protection. The first is the dog, which was primarily represented in connection with hunters as early as Naqada I<sup>4</sup>. Dogs

were also represented in the company of kings, governors, and aristocrats in tombs and on stelae. Favoured pet dogs were honoured by their owners and offered fine burials<sup>5</sup>. The second motif is the lion. Favoured by kings and nobles in hunting scenes (Fig. 3)<sup>6</sup>, lions were also presented as a royal award by the king to distinguished soldiers in the army during the New Kingdom, mainly in the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty<sup>7</sup>. If we are going to depend on the decoration as a factor for understanding the function of this type of object, these motifs suggest another function for the staff, not necessarily connected with protection.

### Staff Typology, Representation, and Function

6 This type of forked object was studied in 1976 by Trude Dothan who introduced a primary typology for staffs depending on the decoration of the lower part of the socket. According to her, they are divided into six types as follows: Type I consists of plain forked butts without any decoration.

2 Dothan 1976, 27–29 fig. 3.

3 Dothan 1976, 33; Cherf 1982, 90.

4 Houlihan 1996, 76 f.; Houlihan 2001, 229.

5 Houlihan 1996, 77 f. 79 fig. 56; Fischer 1980a; Fischer 1980b.

6 Brewer 2001, 512.

7 Marshall 2015, 45; Quack 2022, 222.

Type II is decorated with a rope pattern that is found around the socket and the upper part of the prongs.

Type III has crossbars that link the forked prongs. These are found either plain or decorated.

Type IV has suspended spirals above the cross bars.

Type V has decorated crossbars and openwork of hieroglyphs and symbols above.

Type VI has moulded decoration that is mainly figurative and positioned at the junction of the socket and the prongs<sup>8</sup>.

7 While this classification is largely complete, there are other points in her study concerning this type of object that require further discussion, namely the representation of forked staffs in Egyptian art and the possible function of forked staffs in Ancient Egypt.

## Representations of Forked Staffs in Egyptian Art

8 There are several representations of forked weapons or objects with a forked end in Egyptian art<sup>9</sup>. Representations of forked objects used as weapons or tools are, in fact, known as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty and are worthwhile mentioning here<sup>10</sup>. An ivory label from the royal tombs at Abydos with a partly preserved representation of a person holding a forked spear, belonging to Dothan's type II, can be seen stabbing a circular object (Fig. 2 b)<sup>11</sup>. Forked objects are also frequently represented on the sealings of the kings of the Early Dynastic Period from Abydos. The God Ash is represented in the reign of Peribsen and Khasekhemui on sealings holding the *was*-sceptre with its forked end<sup>12</sup>, an indication that such objects might have been, for example, the lower forked end of a *was*-sceptre (Fig. 2 c–f)<sup>13</sup>. From the tomb of chancellor Khety (TT 311) at Deir el-Bahari, we have a representation of a forked staff among his weapons, which include spears, a battle axe, bows, arrows, and a throw stick<sup>14</sup>.

9 Further representations appear on Middle Kingdom coffins where weapons such as bows, arrows, and maces are illustrated. It is important to note that *was*-sceptres were also depicted among weapons and objects used to fight creatures of the underworld<sup>15</sup>. The forked staff can be seen among the different weapons placed in an upright position or, in some cases, facing downwards<sup>16</sup>. On the walls of the temple of Edfu, we have a representation of King Ptolemy VIII stabbing a captive with a triple-forked spear<sup>17</sup>. All the examples mentioned above provide evidence for the representation of forked objects throughout Egyptian history. It should be mentioned that the forked harpoon and punting sticks are not discussed in this paper, primarily because of the difference in shape and, secondly, due to their customary association with a lower socio-economic class.

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8 Dothan 1976, 22–27; Aston 2009, 382.

9 Dothan 1976, 33.

10 Fischer 1978, 18.

11 Petrie 1902, pl. 11, 8.

12 Petrie 1901, pl. 22, 178. For the God Ash, see Kaplony 1963, pls. 76, 283; 77, 286; 78, 291; 80, 303. 304.

13 Forked staffs are also represented on the sealings of officials of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty; see Ibrahim – Tallet 2008, 164 fig. 7b (sealing of Ankh-ka).

14 Wilkinson – Hill 1983, 23 fig. 18.

15 Cherf 1982, 87 fn. 8. For the vertical staff with forked end, see Jéquier 1921, 165–168.

16 Hassan 1976, 105 fig. 34.

17 Wilkinson 2003, 202.

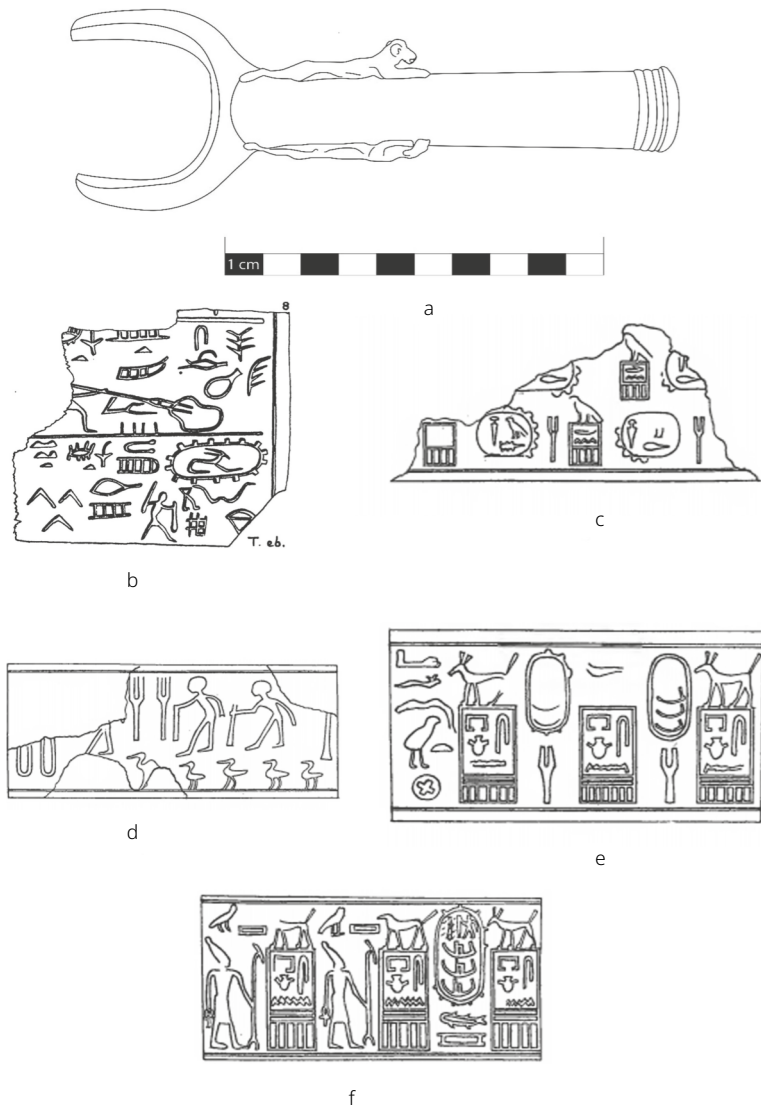


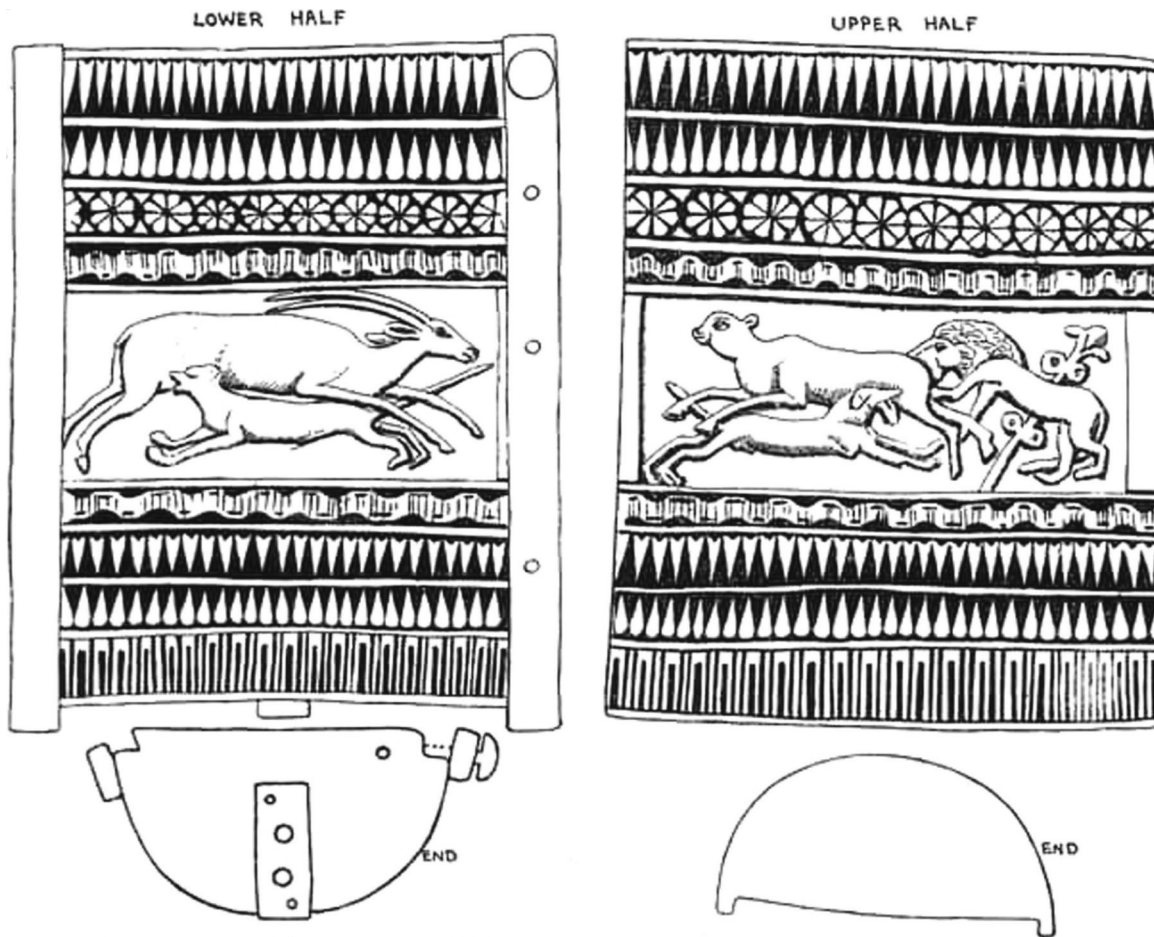
Fig. 2: a) Drawing of the forked staff, Tell Basta, B1332 (scale 1 : 2); b) ivory label from the royal tombs at Abydos with the representation of a person holding a forked spear; c–f) sealings belonging to the kings of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasties from Abydos with representations of forked staves

2

### Function of the Forked Staff

10 The function of forked staffs still remains unexplained, and different opinions have been proposed about their possible use. W. M. Flinders Petrie considered them to be spear butts that were used either to rest on the toe or in a loop when riding or to hold a cord in lancing the spear<sup>18</sup>. However, this opinion is likely to have been influenced by modern use, since there is no representation in Egyptian art of such an application. Moreover, this suggestion does not explain the use of forked butts (if it is a butt) long before the appearance of cavalry in the Archaic Period. While Dothan considered them to have had a dual function, as spear butt, like Petrie, and also as an end of ceremonial staffs or sceptres<sup>19</sup>, she did not explain the function of the ceremonial staff, or why the staff should have a forked end. Cherf and William C. Hayes regarded that they functioned as anti-snake weapons<sup>20</sup>. This opinion was rejected by David A. Aston who found in them a religious use rather than a practical one, since all of the staffs that have had a known provenance came from cemeteries, with the exception of only one that came from a settlement<sup>21</sup>.

18 Petrie 1917, 33.  
 19 Dothan 1976, 34; Aston 2009, 384.  
 20 Hayes 1953, 285; Cherf 1982, 96.  
 21 Aston 2009, 384.



3

11 Again, the suggestion that these staffs were used by snake hunters may have been unduly influenced by modern use. In ancient Egyptian art, in the majority of scenes that show people attacking snakes or dangerous animals in the Book of the Dead, the primary weapon is a knife or a normal spear and not a forked one<sup>22</sup>. One exception alone can be made that mentions the use of a forked spear in attacking the snake Apophis<sup>23</sup>.

12 To understand the function of this kind of object, we should consider other broader factors, such as the number of objects and the find-spot rather than the context, whether settlement or necropolis. When considering the find-spot, it is clear that these come from city-states and capitals like Tanis, Tell Nebesheh, Tell Basta, Abydos, and Meidum<sup>24</sup>. When considering their numbers, they are few, with the largest number of six forked objects coming from Tell Basta. Two have already been published<sup>25</sup>, along with the four unpublished objects mentioned in this study. With hundreds of tombs excavated at Tell Basta and Tell Nebesheh and keeping in mind that some of these staffs might have been made of wood, the relatively small number leads us to attribute this forked staff to high officials, governors, or chieftains of the cities.

13 We should also differentiate between two different functions, namely practical and/or symbolic. From the representations of staffs mentioned above, it is clear that, in early times, the forked staff had a practical role. In such cases, it was used as a

Fig. 3: Toilet box from Sedment with representation of a dog and a lion attacking a gazelle

22 Allen 1960, pls. 20. 21. 66. 67; Faulkner 1985, 40. 48. 56. 59 f.

23 Zandee 1963, 152.

24 See, e. g., the bronze forked staff from the SCA excavation at Meidum (Zaki 2018/2019).

25 Roeder 1956, 461 fig. 703; pl. 62; Dothan 1976, 22.



weapon, as a forked spearhead, and not as a spear butt, as Petrie and Dothan have suggested. It was also used to stab hostile beings, as is clear from the ivory label (Fig. 2 b). Also worth noting here is that the *was*-sceptre was represented on those sealings held by the God Horus, which indicates that these are two separate tools. Therefore, this forked tool cannot be regarded as the end of a ceremonial staff; rather, it should be regarded here as a forked spear and not the butt of a spear.

<sup>14</sup> A symbolic function for any object would occur at a later stage of its use, derived from its practical use and the place of its holder in society. Consequently, in later times, this staff possessed a symbolic function like the other insignia represented on sealings or used practically in this period, such as the mace-head and the *sekhem*-staff. While some of these objects were used to express the royal power of the king or the divine power of the gods<sup>26</sup>, others were used to express leadership, nobility, and the position of the chieftains of the cities or tribal leaders. Among these depictions is the forked staff, used for the Old Kingdom hieroglyph to denote an old man, official, father, master, and sovereign<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> It is clear that this type of forked staff was used practically as a forked spear that later gained symbolic value as a symbol of leadership, nobility, and sovereignty.

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<sup>26</sup> See, e. g., the representation of the God Neheh and the Goddess Djet on the outer walls of the shrine of Tutankhamun, both holding a forked staff in upright position (Wilkinson 2003, 21).

<sup>27</sup> Hayes 1953, 284 f.; Fischer 1978, 17.

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Aiman Ashmawy Ali

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Fig. 3: From Petrie 1924, pl. 58

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