INTRODUCTION: A group of stunning anthropomorphic lime plaster statues was excavated at the Neolithic site of Ain Ghazal, Jordan in 1983 [1]. The statues, carbon dated to 8700 BP, were found stacked on top of each other in a pit. Due to the complexity of the find the whole cache was carefully block-lifted and transferred to the Institute of Archaeology, UCL in London for treatment. This poster describes the conservation of one of the statues following initial consolidation and separation.

OBJECT DESCRIPTION: The bust-like figure has a stout body with an elongated slender neck that carries a relatively flat head. Facial features are simplified, dominated by the eyes, which are large and accentuated with a bituminous mastic. A broad ochre stripe runs across each cheek. The object was modelled by applying calcareous plaster over a bundle of reeds secured with twine, which can be reconstructed from well defined impressions of the plant materials in the plaster surface [2].

CONDITION: During burial the organic reed core had decomposed and the internal void thus created had partly collapsed, causing severe fragmentation and deformation. The neck section was broken into over 90 fragments and the nose is destroyed due to the pressure of an adjacent figure. The figure was previously post-consolidated and protective bandages were applied to allow for its separation from the cache [3]. The plaster was powdery and crumbling in non-consolidated areas. The surface was soiled, particularly at the lower body where dirt had inadvertently been brushed in during excavation. Considerable surface damage at the back of the figure appears to have been caused by insects. The bitumen applications were missing on the left eye and extremely brittle where preserved. The ochre pigment on the face was powdery.

CONSERVATION: Old protective bandages and internal soil were carefully removed. Thorough mapping of the surface was undertaken for precise reconstruction. Loose fragments down to a size of 3mm were transferred to 1:1 scaled photographs of the figure to facilitate later repositioning. Particularly fractured areas were temporarily faced with gauze and Paraloid B-72. Surface cleaning was carried out under 10x magnification, mostly with scalpel and needle. Fragile areas, such as the ochre paint, were consolidated first using 5% Paraloid B-72 in acetone. In previously consolidated areas cleaning was carried out mostly with a 1:1 mixture of acetone and IMS applied with cotton swabs in a careful rolling manner. The front of the body with the brushed-in soil was successfully Laser cleaned in collaboration with the British Museum. Powdery and crumbling plaster was consolidated using 5% Paraloid B-72 in toluene. An internal Perspex support structure was designed to allow vertical presentation of the figure by taking the weight of the head off the fragile neck section. A bundle of seven Perspex rods of 3 and 4mm diameter were joined using dichloromethane and inserted into the void left by the decayed reed bundle. The void was then lightly padded with polyester wadding to stabilise the Perspex rods whilst preserving the internal impressions of reed and twine in the plaster. The support structure was first fitted into the main body and head. The fragmented neck section was then carefully assembled around the structure using Paraloid -B72. In missing areas small bridges of BJK dough, a mastic from jute floc, polyvinyl butyral, kaolin and solvents, were applied and covered with a smooth layer of glass micro-balloons in Paraloid B-72. The gap-filled areas were kept 1mm below original level and painted slightly lighter than the surrounding areas using matt Windsor and Newton acrylic paint. Bitumen applications that had become dislocated were re-attached using Klucel G. To transfer the extremely delicate fragments, only the surface tension of a small wetted cotton bud was used.

REFERENCES

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