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## Short Report:

# An unusual 14th-century bone knife handle from Edison Bell Way, Huntingdon

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Illustration by Gillian Greer based on a drawing by Rosalind Hall

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### Introduction

Excavations by Oxford Archaeology East in 2016 at the junction of Edison Bell Way and Ermine Street, Huntingdon (TL 2351 7221) revealed a relatively complex but intermittent sequence of roadside development spanning the Iron Age to later post-medieval periods (Thatcher 2017). However, the most significant and dense remains relate to the expansion of medieval settlement in this part of the town, represented by a number of ditched property boundaries and associated 'back yard' activity. Of particular note was the discovery of a bone knife handle found in the backfill within one of the ditch terminals.

### The bone knife handle (Fig. 1, Plate 10)

The handle has been produced from a bone midshaft, rounded in section and stemming from the long bone of cattle or horse (specialist analysis has not been able to provide a positive species identification). It measures 65mm by 18mm by 9mm and shows a woman dressed in a long gown that covers her entire body. The lower part of the handle has been cut to shape by knife and pierced, and it includes part of the oval-sectioned tang of an implement, probably a knife. The figure wears a headdress that covers her hair and descends to a point over her shoulders. A decorated headband crosses her forehead. She carries a large bird of prey in her arms, with her left hand wrapped around the feet of the bird and her right arm set below it, with two fingers of her hand extended laterally. The fingers of both hands are depicted schematically as rectangles. The head of the bird is flattened, with a small round eye, and both its chest and wing are delineated by incised lines. A further area of vertical lines below the wing represents the lower tail feathers. The schematic, linear treatment applied to the hands and the bird applies also to other elements of the figure. The right arm includes two sets of lateral paired incised lines and the small mouth of the woman, no wider than the nose, is formed of lips separated and bounded by incised lines.

### Discussion

The figure on the handle can be identified as a woman carrying a falcon. This scene was commonly represented on bone and ivory handles and grivoirs or hair-parters of 13th- to 14th-century date. Whilst some of these handles, including an example from Crowland in Lincolnshire (Howe 1983) show a man with a falcon, there is also a corresponding series showing women in this role. The distinction between male and female figures carrying falcons is not always immediately obvious, with both men and women wearing headbands, for example, (Comte and Gaborit-Chopin 1987, 150), but a key element lies with the presence of a head veil (den Hartog 2012, 15). Young male falconers often hold the bird in a similar way to the women with the left hand above the right, but the male figure is usually shown with his hair constrained by nothing more than a headband, and he is usually wearing a surcot with characteristic notches visible along one or both sides (Bencard 1975, 41, 43 and 47; den Hartog 2012, fig 3).

Examples of bone or ivory anthropomorphic handles were initially catalogued by Leciejewicz and Bencard (Leciejewicz 1974; Bencard 1975). The quantity of handles of this type has risen steadily ever since, with more recent inventories bringing the figure to over 100 examples (Holtmann 1993, 294–384; Burrows *et al.* 2002; den Hartog 2012, 19–24). Intriguingly, women falconers are particularly common in English contexts, although the object type itself remains scarce in medieval England. Beyond England, they are known only from Scandinavia. There are examples from Coventry, Oxford and York, as well as this new find from Huntingdon (Holtmann 1993, fig 136a; den Hartog 2012, 15). The Huntingdon handle closely reflects the less schematic iconography of a Coventry handle, recovered from excavations at Jordan Well/Bayley Lane, as well as the handles from Oxford and York (Bencard 1975, 48–9 and 51; den Hartog 2012, fig 16). The origins of these anthropomorphic handles are thought to lie in the Parisian ivory workshops of the 13th and 14th centuries (Bencard 1975, 40; Howe 1983, 149; Holtmann 1993, 330; MacGregor 2000, 163). It is inherently likely, however, that they were also

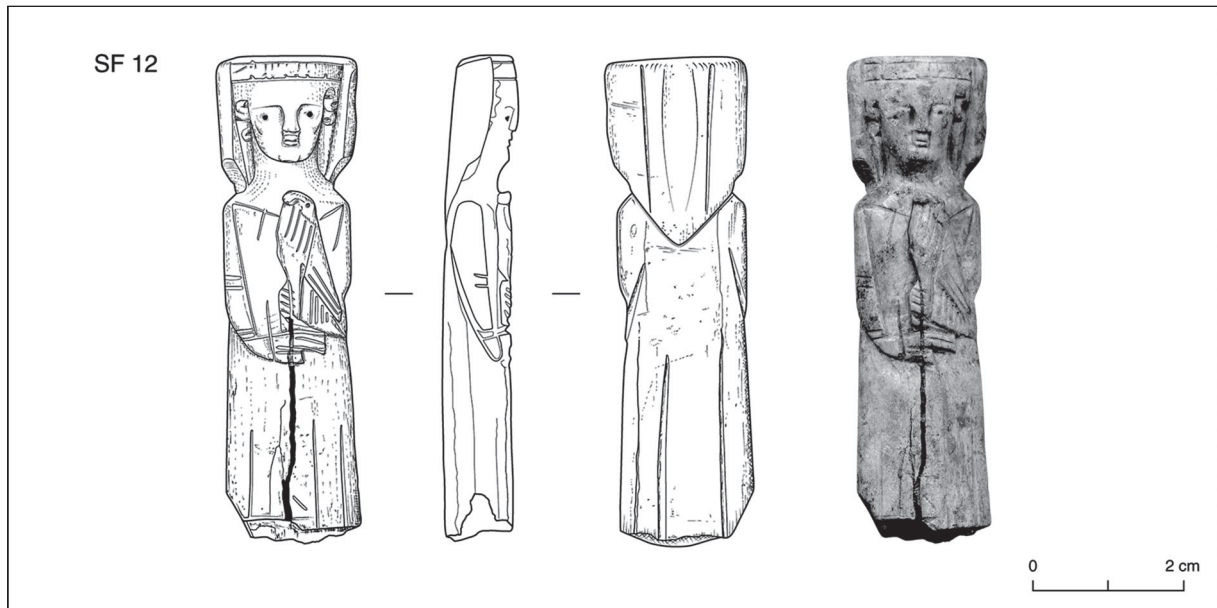


Figure 1. Bone knife handle. See also Plate 10.

produced locally, in broad emulation of fashionable Parisian designs. The English predilection for depicting women falconers, alongside the choice of bone – rather than ivory – as their raw material, is indicative of more local production circumstances (Continental examples show male falconers and do not show women, with the exception of a few handles from Scandinavia). So too is the occurrence of several handles showing women in similar dress, but lacking any birds of prey, or any indication of their arms; they can be seen on handles from Coventry, Hull and Ludgershall Castle (MacGregor 2000, 163 and fig 6.46; den Hartog 2012, fig 5).

Comparatively few of these handles are well-dated and most have been placed within a broad framework of the 13th to 14th century. On stylistic grounds, it is suggested that the earliest examples closely emulate Parisian designs, with the later handles becoming formulaic in their iconography, from the early 14th century onwards, and developing a small range of secular themes (Holtmann 1993, 359; Hall 2001, 174). In this case the subject matter is secular, rather than religious, and it follows a recognised and familiar iconographic scheme, which suggests that it is of 14th-century date. The Oxford handle has been given a similar dating and the York handle came from a context of 14th-century date (Holtmann 1993, 378; Ashby and Spall 2005, 11).

The male anthropomorphic figures are dressed in aristocratic garments and the women have veils with decorated headbands. The bird of prey is likely to be a falcon, although the birds seen on most examples are not delineated in any detail. Figures carrying hawks were regarded as of high social status (Howe 1983, 149; Camille 2000, 98; den Hartog 2012, 15). Within the overall corpus, male and female falconers dominate the assemblage, well ahead of women with lapdogs,

which form the second most common motif. The complex iconography depicted on them indicates that these handles (and the knives that they accompany) were not intended for ordinary daily use and den Hartog has suggested that they were table knives, used communally at meals on special occasions and thereby anticipating the trend for sets of cutlery for the table that emerged in the early post-medieval period (den Hartog 2012, 7). In effect, they were display knives, intended for show and to provoke conversation (Marquardt 1997, 12 and 24; den Hartog 2012, 7–8).

The figure falls within the domain of the medieval aristocratic art of love, depicted in a wide range of objects and materials (Holtmann 1993, 371–2; Camille 2000). The woman is shown as a falconer, indicating both her nobility and her potential role as a hunter in a relationship, with the ability to control and tame the bird, and to prevent it from flying away. Thus, whilst a 12th-century German poem describes how 'Women and falcons are easily tamed, if you lure them the right way, they come to meet their man' Camille has noted that 'when the lady is shown holding the bird of prey ... it usually means that (within the amatory fiction at least) she has her lover under her power' (Camille 2000, 96 and 97). There is no doubt that in late medieval England, a man or woman using this knife within the context of an aristocratic feast or banquet would be well aware of its symbolism and the amatory message of love, courtship and power that it portrays.

### Bibliography

Ashby, S, and Spall, C 2005, *Artefacts and Environmental Evidence: Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn Objects*. In