

CHAPTER 6

ASTRAGALI

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The astragalus, or *talus*, is a bone from the hind leg of four-footed mammals. Most of the astragali recovered in the Near East came from domestic sheep or goats (Dandoy 1996:51). The hexagonal shape of this bone made it suitable for use in numerous games known from early periods of human history (Brewster 1960; Baran 1974; Watson 1979; de Vries 1980; Lewis 1988). Sometimes, astragali were filled with lead (Brewster 1960).

Eleven bone astragali found at Maresha are included in this report. Ten are inscribed and one (No. 6) is incised with a symbol or another decoration. These astragali were probably used as game-pieces. Players of games threw the astragali, which were inscribed on one of their sides. The side of consequence was that which appeared on top. Therefore, the names inscribed had significance for the game (see Chapter 10).

A few astragali-like glass items found at Maresha were recently published (Spaer 2001:232). Ruth Tal-Jackson is presently studying the glass objects from Maresha, including the astragali-like glass items.

THE CATALOG

1. Inv. No. 1-1094-523-S1

Dimensions: 3.2 × 2.0 × 2.0 cm



Cat. No. 1.

Incision on bone: NIKH

Interpretation: Νίκη

Translation: Victory or Nike.

Ref. Dandoy 1996:54, Fig. 6 (from Roller 1987, non vidi).

2. Inv. No. 1-100-733-S6

Dimensions: 3.2 × 1.5 × 2.0 cm



Cat. No. 2.

Incision on bone: ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤ

Interpretation: Ἀφροδίτη

Translation: *Aphrodite*.

3. Inv. No. 1-1096-613-S2

Dimensions: 2.8 × 2.0 × 1.9 cm



Cat. No. 3.

Incision on fragment of bone: ΑΡΠΑ[
 Interpretation: ἀρπά[ξα]
 Translation: I've got (?)

4. Inv. No. 1-1097-608-S7

Dimensions: 3.5 × 1.7 × 1.8 cm



Cat. No. 4.

Incision on bone: ΠΥΓΩΝ

Interpretation: πυγών

Free translation: Foot. πυγών is actually the distance between the elbow to the first joint of the fingers, about 40 cm.

5. Inv. No. 99-01-004-S3

Dimensions: 3.0 × 1.5 × 1.5 cm



Cat. No. 5.

Incision on bone: ΕΡΩΣ

Interpretation: Ἔρως

Translation: Eros (the name of the god of love), or just *the Love*.

6. Inv. No. 128-21-724-S2

Dimensions: 3.3 × 1.8 × 1.8 cm

Decoration or a symbol incised on bone.

7. Inv. No. 128-40-1051-S3

Dimensions: 3.0 × 1.5 × 1.8 cm



Cat. No. 7.

Incision on bone: ΝΙΚΗ

Interpretation: νίκη

Translation: Victory, or Nike. See No. 1 above.

8. Inv. No. 128-45-1132-S1

Dimensions: 2.3 × 1.4 × 1.3 cm

Partly destroyed.

Incision on bone: ΜΕ

9. Inv. No. 147-5-295-S1

Dimensions: 3.2 × 1.8 × 1.5 cm



Cat. No. 9.

Incision on bone: ΝΙΚ

Interpretation/Translation: some form of νίκη, Victory or νικῶ, to defeat; probably the name of Nike, the goddess of victory. See No. 1.

10. Inv. No. 147-08-1367-S1

Dimensions: 3.0 × 2.0 × 1.5 cm



11. Inv. No. 147-09-1768-S3

Dimensions: 3.0 × 2.0 × 1.5 cm

Incision on bone: NIKH

Interpretation: Νίκη

Translation: *Victory* or *Nike*. See No. 1.



Cat. No. 10.

Incision on bone: HRA

Interpretation: Ἥρα

Translation: Hera. The name of the main goddess in the Greek pantheon.

Ref. Dandoy 1996:55, Fig. 8b.

Four of the of eleven astragali from Maresha are inscribed with the word *nike*, referring to the name of the goddess of victory, Nike (Nos. 1, 7, 9, and 11), or just a noun ‘victory’, which certainly indicates the winning side of the game-piece. Another two bear nouns, probably connected towith some obscure game rules (No. 3, something like ‘I’ve got’ and No. 4, ‘foot’, probably a step in some game). Two others with the names of Aphrodite (No. 2) and Eros (No. 5) are perhaps related to some kind of erotic game. Another goddess mentioned is Hera (No. 10), the spouse of Zeus, the highest deity in Greek mythology, perhaps a symbol of power and superiority. The reading of the incisions on another two pieces is uncertain.

These astragali anare evidence of the common Hellenistic culture present at Maresha (see Chapter 10), but may also reflect the cults of the mentioned gods (see the same conclusion in Gilmore 1997).

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