

# BESOID FIGURES IN AN AITHIOPIAN FRONTIER TAVERN: THE QASR IBRÎM WINDOW-GRILLES REVISITED<sup>1</sup>

## 1.

In early 1969, the Cambridge University expedition at Qasr Ibrîm, directed by J. Martin Plumley, cleared debris near the so-called House X-4 (later renumbered "House 178"). Here the team found fragments of a series<sup>2</sup> of sandstone "ornamental lattice type windows," rather uniform in size and design,<sup>3</sup> two of which appeared to be restorable. One of these window-grilles displayed a carving of "a naked man carrying an elephant on his shoulders,"<sup>4</sup> while the "less complete, shows a similar figure bearing an antelope or gazelle" (Plumley 1970, pp. 12, 16, pl. XXIII, 4). It was later established that these grilles had belonged to a Meroitic building, which had been "originally designed, and for several centuries served, as a tavern" (Plumley & Adams 1974, pp. 218–219). Eventually this building fell into decay and was abandoned, but apparently during the Christian period, it was reconstructed; the window-grilles were removed and discarded in the nearby debris, and the house was adapted to the needs of the new residents of the site.

As part of the division of the finds from Qasr Ibrîm, the two surviving window-grilles were received by the Egypt Exploration Society from the Egyptian

Antiquities Authorities and eventually went to the British Museum. Even before their reconstruction from the fragments had been attempted, they had attracted much interest from the scholars who had seen the published photograph of one of them.

The interest in the Qasr Ibrîm window-grilles (particularly in that of the elephant-bearer) grew rapidly after another artefact with a similar theme came to light. This was a watercolour rendering of a wall painting discovered in Meroe-City, found in the records of the Liverpool University expedition to Meroe led by John Garstang between 1909 and 1914. The scene pictured a man carrying two small elephants hanging by rope to opposite ends of a carrying pole on his shoulder. A reproduction of this picture was published by Steffen Wenig in the catalogue of the 1978 Brooklyn Museum exhibition *Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and Sudan*.<sup>5</sup> The mentioned watercolor was supposed to be a copy of a wall painting preserved somewhere in the so-called Royal City, one of the main areas explored by the expedition, but the precise location and the subsequent history of this mural was unknown.

Wenig stated that the motif of the elephant-carrier in the Meroe-City painting "is unknown in Egyptian or Meroitic art," pointing out the Qasr Ibrîm window-grille depiction of a man with an elephant draped over his shoulder as the closest parallel, which in its turn he considered a compositional development of the image of the ram-bearer, well known in Egypt and Greece (Africa in Antiquity 1978-b, p. 210, text to Cat. no. 132). Accepting Plumley's interpretation, Wenig described the Qasr Ibrîm figure as a "representation of a man carrying an elephant on his back" (Africa in Antiquity 1978-b, p. 210, text to Cat. no. 132), and the one from Meroe as "a youth carrying two elephants" (Africa in Antiquity 1978-a, p. 105, caption to Fig. 75) and "<a> naked, thickset youth carries a yoke over his shoulder, from each end of which is slung an elephant" (Africa in Antiquity 1978-b, loc. cit.). The editor suggested that "<p>erhaps the representations from Meroe and

1 Due to some developments beyond my control, I had to work on this paper with limited access to the literature I needed, which meant that I was mainly confined to publications accessible through the Internet. Certain references may therefore not look updated. These unfavourable conditions make me all the more grateful to several colleagues whose help made it possible for this study to appear. I am greatly indebted to Julie Anderson for her generosity in providing me with her photographs of the two objects discussed here, for sharing with me the relevant bibliographical data and for answering my numerous enquiries. I highly appreciate Angelika Lohwasser's patience and consent to accept this paper for publication in the present issue of the MittSAG. And as usual my sincere thanks go to Tim Kendall for his indefatigable efforts to make my English text more idiomatic.

2 Plumley 1970, p. 16: "undetermined number"; Plumley & Adams 1974, p. 218: "at least four".

3 Plumley 1970, p. 16: "each carved originally from a single block of sandstone 80 cm. by 55 cm. in size and with a thickness of 7 cm.".

4 Cf. the caption to the photograph: "Meroitic window showing a naked man bearing a small elephant on his shoulders" (Plumley 1970, pl. XXIII, 4).

5 Africa in Antiquity 1978-a, p. 104, fig. 75; 1978-b, p. 210, Cat. no. 132.



Qasr Ibrîm evoke a folk tale. In that case, this would be our first indication that elephant tales, so popular in Africa, were favored as far back as the Meroitic Period” (1978-b, loc. cit.).

In a 1998 conference report (text published in 2004), Eugenio Fantusati put forward an alternative view, thinking that “the origin of this painting is not to be found in the African context at all but rather in the Hellenistic sphere,” bearing in mind that “the Kushite culture had extensive relationships with the Greco-Roman world” (1998/2004, p. 251). In his opinion, the picture of the naked elephant-bearer (who, incidentally, also holds a certain object resembling a club in his left hand) looks very much like the popular antique representations of the Greek mythological hero Herakles carrying on his shoulder a pole with two captives, the brigand Kerkopes brothers, bound to it and hanging head-downwards (1998/2004, pp. 252–254).

A few years later the discussion was continued by the present writer, who working in the Archive of the Griffith Institute at Oxford happened to come across a hitherto unknown copy of the mentioned wall-painting from Meroe-City (Vinogradov 2013, Vinogradov 2014), which differed from the Liverpool drawing in some minor points, and so may have been made by a different draughtsman.

Some details of the original, such as the beard of the elephant-bearer, which (along with the nakedness of his stout body and the legendary club in hand) is among the most important features of the Greek hero in antique art, are better seen in the Oxford copy and seem to strengthen the interpretation of the person as Herakles. At the same time it was suggested by me that the prototype of the Meroe-City elephant-bearer portrait may not have been the popular depiction in Greek and Roman art of the hero carrying two Kerkopes, but something like the equally frequent motif of Herakles carrying two large amphorae (illustrating the story of his servitude to the Lydian queen Omphale) or two encaged Pygmies as shown in a curious scene on a krater from Catania (Vinogradov 2014, pp. 227–231).

It was further pointed out by me that certain particulars (the supposed traces of a *Wesekh*-collar and two oblique strokes on the cheek, looking like facial scars), better discernible on the Oxford copy, might suggest that – through the fantasy of a local artist – the image of Herakles was to some extent adapted to the Nilotic cultural traditions (Vinogradov 2013, pp. 137–138).

The differences between the Liverpool and the Oxford copies (which are not tracings but *drawings* it should be remembered) made it obvious that only

a collation with the original might help to ascertain which of the two conveys it more precisely, and thus hopefully to reach a better understanding of the scene with the elephant-bearer from Meroe-City and indirectly also the one from Qasr Ibrîm. A closer study of the archival material in the Griffith Institute eventually made it possible to establish with a greater certainty that: a) the wall painting under discussion was found by Garstang’s expedition in the so-called Frescoed Chamber,<sup>6</sup> and b) the original painting, from which the drawing was made, was destroyed by a natural disaster several years after its discovery. Thus, no more information about the Elephant-Bearer depiction in Meroe-City will ever be possible to obtain,<sup>7</sup> leaving the Qasr Ibrîm window-grilles’ reliefs as the only sources of relevant data on the subject under consideration.

## 2.

It will be remembered that the previous discussion of both representations of the Elephant-Bearers was conducted with reference to the photographs attached to their first publications, by Plumley in 1969 and by Wenig in 1978 respectively. Strangely enough, the existence of the third related depiction, briefly mentioned in Plumley’s report as “a similar figure bearing an antelope or gazelle” (1969, p. 16), which, as it turns out today, could have long ago prompted a new perspective on the problem,<sup>8</sup> was for some time neglected.

The situation has drastically changed most recently when the Qasr Ibrîm relief of the Elephant-Bearer was, somewhat unexpectedly, put on display among the objects of the exhibition *Luxury and Power: Persia to Greece*, organised in the British Museum in 2023.<sup>9</sup> New photographs with high resolution

6 Along the narrow edge of the paper sheet with the Elephant-Bearer drawing, long kept as a roll and now spread out, are faint traces of this caption in red pencil. With high degree of certainty this term refers to the palace building M 292 (cf. Garstang 1912, p. 51).

7 I have so far been unable to find reference to any photographic copies of the Elephant-Bearer fresco in the archives kept in the Griffith Institute or in the published reports and/or relevant research works.

8 Ironically, this latter representation, partly reconstructed, happened to be the only one of the three depictions under discussion which eventually became accessible for inspection *de visu*, having been exhibited in the British Museum since 1991. Paradoxically, it was somehow “lost” among other exhibits and did not attract the attention of experts which it deserved.

9 I am thankful to Tim Moller for drawing my attention to this exhibition with the Elephant-Bearer’s relief (for the first time) appearing on display.



were prepared for the catalogue of the exhibition, one of which with an appropriate annotation was placed on the museum's website.<sup>10</sup> With this new and much more efficient tool, it has become possible to examine some details of the objects in question which had previously remained unnoticed and/or underestimated.

First of all, it appears that the Qasr Ibrîm depictions of two animal-bearers, shown in practically the same pose (Fig. 1 a–b), imply that the character represented is the same. It is as if these representations picture two episodes in a non-verbal narration about a single personage.<sup>11</sup> A few minor differences between them suggest that the figures' outlines may have been copied from the same stencil but carved by different craftsmen.

Although the artist(s) seem(s) to have adhered to the main rules of Egyptian iconography, which combined the frontal and profile views of the body, the work in some points reveals certain deviations from the usual canons.

Thus, the viewer can hardly fail to notice some disproportionality of the figure depicted in both cases as having a rather short trunk and overdeveloped limbs with muscles peculiarly underscored by deep furrows.

The head of the being depicted looks unusual too. Although the face has not survived in either scene, the very "framing" of it is curious, for both figures appear to have long hair (or a wig?) falling onto the shoulders, which is particularly distinct in the Gazelle-Bearer's portrayal. The hair is decorated, or fixed, with a fillet somewhat resembling a diadem with a strange extension like a knot above the brows. This appendage on the Elephant-Bearer's head-band looks like the reversed Greek letter *epsilon* with three thin petals, which on his "twin's" head are rounded as flower buds and form something like a trefoil. Although the fillet as a head-gear is well enough known in Egyptian iconography, the presence of an (appended?) decoration on the forehead does not seem to have been a very common feature (cf. note 28 below).

Other adornments in both cases are wristlets and armlets, while the surviving fragment of the Gazelle-

Bearer's near leg shows that at least one of the two figures wore anklet(s) too.

The lower half of the bearers' bodies is still more peculiar. Just like the Elephant-Bearer in Meroe-City, the Qasr Ibrîm bearers are depicted completely naked, which looks very strange because nudity in adults was most unusual in the art of the Nile Valley, with rarest exceptions being confined to representations of children before pubescence.<sup>12</sup> Somewhat astonishing is also the fact that for all the hypertrophic musculature of the two bodies, one can see a rather plump, distended abdomen overhanging the genitals (Fig. 2 a).

The legs, judging by their surviving upper parts, must have been in accord with the stocky torso and thick muscular arms. What is noteworthy is that despite the quite normal Egyptian arrangement of the upper part of the trunk and head (frontal in the former and profile in the latter case), the lower part of the body in both scenes is depicted rather oddly. Judging by the advanced position of *both* thighs with both knees flexed (particularly well visible in the Gazelle-Bearer), the two Qasr Ibrîm figures were shown as if *walking on half-bent legs*.

The most intriguing circumstance, however, now very well discernible thanks to the British Museum's new photographs with height resolution, is that at about the level of the genitals in both figures is a curious hook-like protuberance at the bottom of the back (especially clear in the Elephant-Bearer), whose shape is too regular to be taken for an accidental projection (Fig. 2 b). The purpose of this detail is quite manifest in the reconstructed relief of the Gazelle-Bearer, where a very similar "hook" has an extension in the form of a prolonged pointed *tail* (Fig. 1 b).

### 3.

The existence of a tail, once, doubtless, present in both surviving reliefs from Qasr Ibrîm, is a point which has somehow happened to be completely ignored in the course of previous discussion of the Elephant-Bearers in the research literature,<sup>13</sup> and which is in fact of principal importance for interpretation of these pieces of the Ancient Sudanese art.

10 Window-grille [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA82812](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA82812).

11 A possible alternative could be that what we see here are *twins*, or perhaps *partners*. The body of the Gazelle-Bearer seems to have a bit more roundness, and – unlike the Elephant-Bearer – does not display genitals. Could it be inferred here that a *female* figure is represented (like Beset and/or Ahat) carrying, logically enough, a somewhat lighter load?

12 Cf. Roeder 1956, S. 104–133, §§ 149–176 ["Nackter Knabe"].

13 As may be seen in the photograph attached to Plumley's excavation report, the oblong *extension* of the aforementioned characteristic "hook" and a fragment of leg with an anklet were initially thought to be parts of the Elephant-Bearer's figure. It was only later – apparently in the course of the reconstruction – that these fragments were recognized as belonging to the second window-grille.

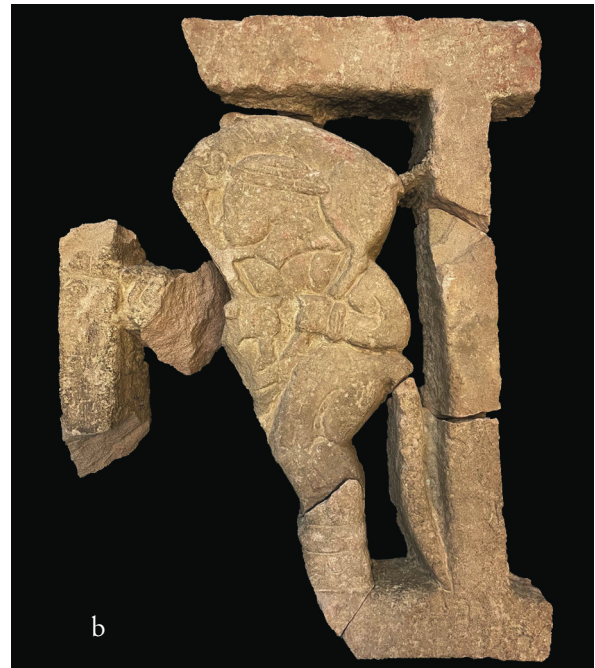


Fig. 1: The Qasr Ibrîm window-grilles (Photos J. Anderson taken courtesy the Trustees of the British Museum).- a) The Elephant-Bearer (EA82812); b) The Gazelle(?)-Bearer (EA71852).



Fig. 2: The lower part of the Elephant-Bearer's body (fragments of Fig. 1 a; Photo J. Anderson).- a) The genitalia; b) The "baboon's curve" at the base of the tail.

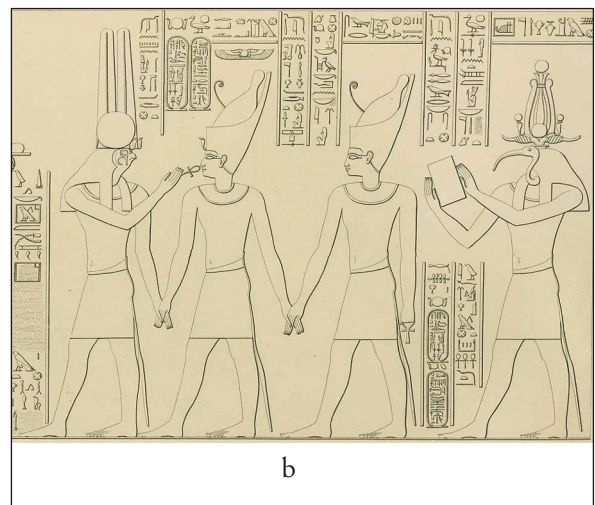


Fig. 3: The attached ceremonial tails.- a) King's tail on the Narmer Palette (after Petrie 1953, pl. J, fig. 25, fragment; reversed); b) Ptolemy XI and three gods with ceremonial tails (after LD IV. 45, b).

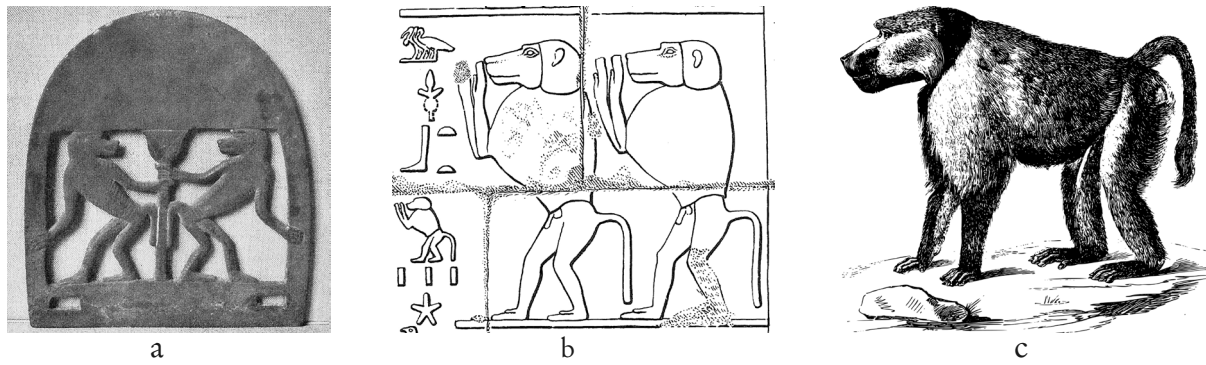


Fig. 4: The “curve” at the base of the tail in baboons.- a) Decorative axe head with two baboons (after Fechheimer 1921: Taf. 155); b) Scene from Taharqa’s edifice at Karnak (after Parker et al. 1979, pl. 18 A, fragment); c) Baboon (© Pixaby, reversed).

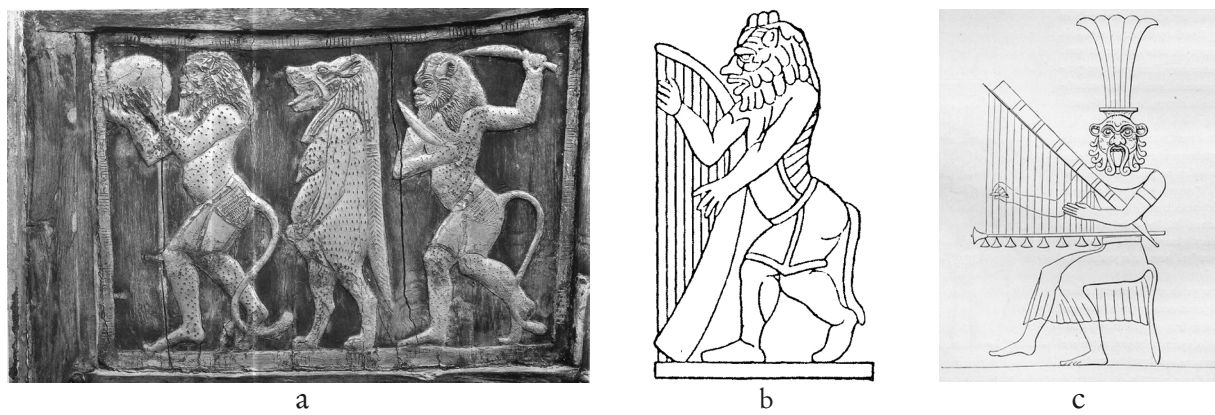


Fig. 5: The “baboon’s gait” of the Besoids.- a) Dancing procession (after Quibell 1908, pl. XLI, reversed); b) Besoid with harp (after Krall 1889, S. 81, no. 66, reversed); c) Besoid with harp (after Prisse d’Avenas 1879, p. 146).

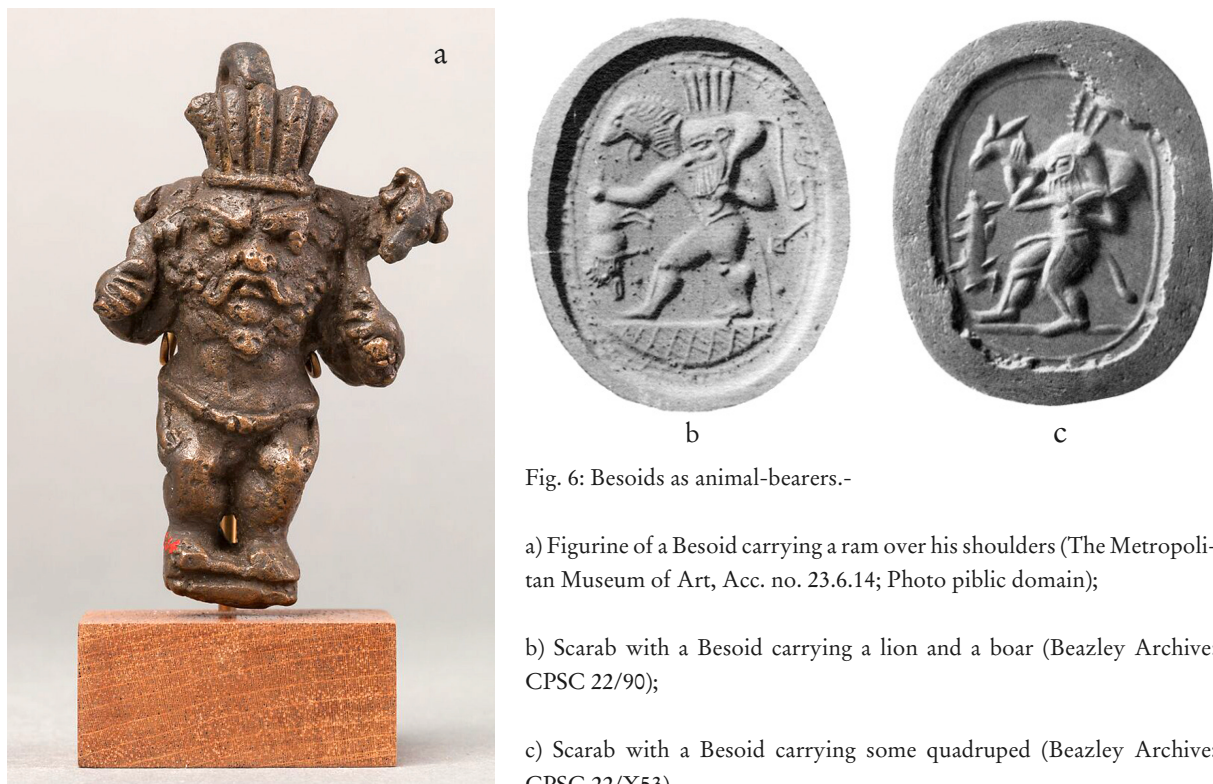


Fig. 6: Besoids as animal-bearers.-

a) Figurine of a Besoid carrying a ram over his shoulders (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Acc. no. 23.6.14; Photo public domain);

b) Scarab with a Besoid carrying a lion and a boar (Beazley Archive: CPSC 22/90);

c) Scarab with a Besoid carrying some quadruped (Beazley Archive: CPSC 22/X53).



Fig. 7: The head gear variation.- a) Mane and head-band of the Elephant-Bearer (fragment of Fig. 1 a; Photo J. Anderson); b) Mane and wreath of the Gazelle-Bearer (fragment of Fig. 1 b; Photo J. Anderson); c) Ivy-wreath of Dionysos (“Cup by the Kallis Painter”, Side B [Photo dionysus-with-his-mother-semele-with-a-crown-of-ivy-among-vines-and-silenus-harvesting-PP90H8.jpg; fragment], reversed).



Fig. 8: Besoids revelling.-

a) Bacchic Scene on vase 8216, Karanog Cemetery (after Woolley & Randall-MacIver 1910-b, pl. 45);

b) Scarab with two Besoids (male and female?) drinking from a krater by means of tubes (after Grenfell 1902, p. 32, fig. XXXVIII).

It has long been noticed that tails as parts of humans', gods' and animals' images could have different semantics when shown on objects of visual arts.

a) It is on some of the earliest Egyptian artefacts that anthropomorphic figures with *attached* – presumably animals' – tails are recognisable. In some instances, one can see them worn by certain private persons (as, e.g., each of the seventeen warriors/hunters visible on the Hunters Palette) (Petrie 1953, pl. 1, 3). Later, presumably from the proto-dynastic Narmer Palette (Petrie 1953, pls. J, fig. 25; K,

fig. 26) on and up to the latest times of the pharaonic history (Fig. 3 a–b) a detachable ceremonial tail<sup>14</sup> (bovine or giraffean) served as a most important attribute of two-dimensional<sup>15</sup> depictions of many, but not every, of the masculine deities and above all of kings of Egypt and of their counterparts in Kush. The iconographic peculiarity of the ceremonial tail is its being normally accompanied by a belt to which it

<sup>14</sup> Helck 1986, Sp. 591; Watson 1987, pp. 28, 30–31, 42–43.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly enough, the ceremonial tail of kings and gods tends to be *omitted* in sculpture representations in the round.



is attached, as is minutely shown on the well-known representation of the king on the Narmer Palette (Fig. 3 a).<sup>16</sup> As an *artificial* (and thus, *dead*) object, even if it is natural by origin (say, as a hunting trophy), this element of apparel – in fact a special regalia of kings and (certain) deities – closely envelops the bottom part of its owner's body (Fig. 3 a–b).

b) The tail looks quite different in depictions of those beings which have it as a *natural* limb, whether it is a scene with live animals in wild life or creatures whose images are used metaphorically, often humanised, in religious context or presented as elements of decor on some domestic utensils, etc. As a natural part of the body it is often seen raised upwards (as in the lions and monkeys), or hanging down with a curve at the end (often in lions and sometimes in baboons) or with a curve at the base<sup>17</sup> (sometimes in bovines and particularly often in apes) (Fig. 4).

The last observation is of relevance in our case because the characteristic curve at the base of the tail is visible in both reliefs from Qasr Ibrîm, and being particularly clear, as if accentuated, in the Elephant-Bearer (Fig. 2 b). And since the tail turns out to be a *natural part of the body* and not an element of its apparel (there being, besides, no trace of a belt, which an *artificial* tail might theoretically be fastened to, in either of the instances) it has to be admitted that the definition “man”, applied to the figures under discussion by Plumley in 1969 and ever since remaining in use, is *inaccurate*. The curious animal-bearer(s) depicted on the Qasr Ibrîm window-grilles is/are only partly human (judging by the adornments on their heads, arms and legs) and partly animal.

#### 4.

Bearing in mind that the creature(s) before us have a twofold morphology, it would seem expedient to draw attention to several points in their appearance which might look as possible hints intentionally or

not left to us by the author(s) of these representations:

- a) the curve (or “hook”) at the base of the tail is a very peculiar feature – perhaps even more characteristic than the well-known tuft on the end of the lion's tail, which in Egyptian iconography seems to be typical of only one family of bipeds: the baboons<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 4 a–c);
- b) the strange posture (most unnatural for a normal human when walking) with both knees bent and both upper legs advanced, is, in Egyptian representations, the most typical stance of baboons with their “dancing gait” when walking;<sup>19</sup>
- c) in light of the two observations above, there are enough reasons to interpret the curious wig-like shoulder-length “coiffure” of both Qasr Ibrîm bearers as a mane, a feature of lions (normally of the males) and of some monkeys and apes, and first of all baboons.<sup>20</sup>

Taking further into account the human features of the character in question (better conveyed by the adornments on the head, arms and legs, than by the Elephant-Bearer's genitalia looking as much simian as human),<sup>21</sup> one can get a strong impression that the creature carved on the two Qasr Ibrîm window-grilles is very much like those represented on the well-known furniture panels in the tomb of Yuya and Tuya<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 5 a–c) in the Valley of the Kings, which

16 It is perfectly clear in the Narmer Palette that the upper end of the attached ceremonial tail of the king goes beyond the edge of the belt.

17 This part of the body is often accentuated in Egyptian representations of the Besoids, the god holding by his hand the curve at the base of his tail (Naville 1886, Taf. XXXIX, P.b. [Vigniette]; Petrie 1927, pl. xxxvii, 15; Hodjash 2004, p. 121, no. 108). Most likely this gesture (“Hand-on-tail”?) had some special meaning – otherwise it would not have been replicated so many times, but its semantics still remains unknown. Incidentally, this iconographical peculiarity speaks in favour of the Besoids' association with baboons rather than with lions (which seem never to show the mentioned curve), as has been traditionally thought.

18 Quagebeur 1993, pp. 6, fig. 8; 7, figs. 9–10; 12, fig. 15; Pio 2018, pp. 47, fig. 4.2; 50, fig. 4.5; 51, fig. 4.6; 80, fig. 5.3.

19 James Romano in his fundamental study described the pose of bended legs, typical to Bes, as “<the bent-leg attitude <...> <which> alludes to the figure's origin as a lion. They rarely stand on their hind legs but when they do, physical restriction oblige lions to flex their legs” (1989-a, pp. 53–54, 109). This explanation is disputable however, since many examples may be noted where lions, as well as other quadrupeds, in metaphorical contexts are shown walking with an ordinary “human” gait (as e.g. the well-known unguent vase in the form of a lion from Tutankhamun's tomb – see Carter 1933, pl. XLVIII). In fact, the walk on half-bent hind legs is by far more typical of the representations of apes (see e.g. Quagebeur 1993 and Pio 2018) than lions (which, as Romano himself admits, rarely rise on the hind paws), because of which it might be called “the baboon's gait”.

20 Few scholars discussing the appearance of the god Bes and his likes seem to have taken into consideration that in reality the mane is not a feature only of lions (mainly, but not exclusively, male) but also of some apes, above all the baboons (cf. Sethe 1897, Sp. 325; Altenmüller 1975, Sp. 97).

21 Quagebeur 1993, pp. 7 (fig. 9); 14 (figs. 17, 19).

22 Valley of the Kings - KV 46. Quibell 1908, pp. 50–54, nos. 51109–51113; pls. XXVIII–XXXI (head of bed-sted 51109); XXXII–XXXIV (chair 51111); XXXV–XXXVI (chair 51112); XXXIX–XLII (chair 51113). cf. Romano 1989-b, pp. 288–292 (Cat. no. 90), cf. 281–287 (Cat. no. 89).

are often considered among the earliest depictions of the god Bes, or rather Besoids,<sup>23</sup> walking in procession with human attributes – tambourines and knives – in hands. Most iconographic features of the Qasr Ibrîm figures, including the mane and the distended abdomen, the typical “baboon’s curve” at the base of the tail (which, it should be mentioned, over the time becomes one of the most characteristic features of the Besoids’ image) and the “dancing<sup>24</sup> – or maybe rather *baboon’s*? – walk”<sup>25</sup> on half-bent legs, are recognisable in full measure in the mentioned series of Egyptian representations.

Numerous parallels could be referred to in support of the above identification, of which one can point out the Late Period figurine from the Metropolitan Museum of a Besoid with a quadriped – presumably a lamb – over his shoulders<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 6 a), or a scarab from the same museum, with a Besoid carrying a lion and a boar<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 6 b) or another one with an antelope (?) on the deity’s shoulders<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 6 c).

Here we come up to the point which is of principal importance for the theme under discussion. As

mentioned above, Wenig in his comment on the Elephant-Bearer’s representations in Meroe-City and Qasr Ibrîm has supposed that they probably illustrate one of the “elephant tales” traditional for African folklore. Suggesting this, he and other writers on this subject, including the present one, have missed the fact (briefly but distinctly stated in Plumley’s preliminary report) that the second of the surviving window-grilles shows the same personage carrying a *different* animal (“an antelope or gazelle”), which undermines the hypothesis that an “*elephant tale*” could ever have served as a folklore background of the curious images from Qasr Ibrîm. The metaphor behind these representations must have had a much wider application.

## 5.

Trying to better understand these reliefs, we should not ignore several small details which might lead us in new directions. For example, we notice a slight difference in the shape of the head gear of the two figures. The Elephant-Bearer’s fillet tightly encircles his head (Fig. 7 a), making one think of a diadem, shown in profile, with a lotus decoration like those which may occasionally be seen, in frontal view, in late Egyptian monuments, as, for example, in the Fayum portraits.<sup>29</sup> The headdress of the Gazelle-Bearer, on the other hand, seems to envelop his head rather loosely and looks more like a *wreath* (Fig. 7 b). Such a headdress, because of the specific form of the floral decoration, with a few pointed petals only on the forehead, calls in mind the comparable type of *ivy-wreath* shown, for instance, in the depiction of the Greek god Dionysos on the well-known “Cup by the Kallis painter”<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 7 c). It would certainly seem that no other attribute would have been more appropriate in the figure depicted in the Qasr Ibrîm *tavern* (by its function, the place of a specific form of worship of Dionysos/Bacchos), bearing in mind that some such congenial symbols as “an amphora in an upright stand” and “bunches of grapes hanging from a vine” are stated in the excavation report to have been found as relief adornments on the outside walls of this building.<sup>31</sup>

23 The term “Besoid” (used, and probably coined, by Alice Grenfell [1902, pp. 22, 37], along with “Pataicoid” [pp. 27, 34, 36, 37]), in my opinion, is preferable to “Bes”, “Bes-like figure”, etc., because of its compactness and greater flexibility. Remaining a *collective* designation (which seems to be generally accepted by now) of the *unlabelled* images, it may be legitimately applied to those manifestations which: a) *predate* or *postdate* the “classical” forms of Bes; b) show *deviations* (as e.g., hybrid forms) in *iconography*; c) are *foreign* and more or less *imitative* images. Some considerations in favour of this view are set forth in Vinogradov 2020, p. 131, n. 4; 135–136, n. 22.

24 Cf. Romano 1989–b, p. 283: “a spirited posture suggestive of dance”.

25 The scenes of the panels of chair 51113 certainly show dancing Besoids, one of whom holds a tambourine (Quibell 1908, pls. XLI–XLII). But on the head of bed-sted 51109 these creatures are depicted walking with the same gate without any accompanying musician (Quibell 1908, pls. XXVIII–XXX). Thus, the association of their walk with dances may have been secondary, due to outward similarity only. As for baboons, walking on half-bent legs in Egyptian representations is their standard iconographical feature.

26 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/570702>, with label “Bes carrying a ram over his shoulders”.

27 Beazley Archive: CPSC 22/90 with label “<Bes> Walking; holds boar inverted” (<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/Gems/Scarabs/Images/Images%20Extra%206/22.90m.jpg>).

28 Beazley Archive: CPSC 22/X53. The precise identification of the depicted animals in such examples is often most problematic, bearing in mind the small size of the objects and the most probable conventionality of their composition. Cf. the interpretation suggested by John Beazley: “Walks shouldering a deer” (<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/Gems/Scarabs/Images/Images%20Extra%206/22.X53m.jpg>).

29 Pavlov 1965, pls. II, IV; Walker & Bierbrier 1997, pp. 90–91, no. 63; 209, no. 169; Walker 2000, pp. 59–60, Cat. no. 21; cf. 46–47, Cat. no. 9.

30 <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/70125105@N06/26302214285/in/photostream/>>; for a description and analysis see Isler-Kerényi 2004, pp. 70–73; id. 2010, pp. 66–71.

31 Plumley & Adams 1974, p. 218; pl. XLIV, 1.



The wreath resembling that of Dionysos, on the head of a creature walking with the gait of the “dancing baboon” might further call to mind the image of a satyr/silen,<sup>32</sup> a Mediterranean parallel to the god Bes, believed by some scholars to have borrowed his image from the latter. As a companion of Dionysos in Bacchic processions and drinking parties, the satyr – one or several – was often featured with a cup and/or some other vessel or a wineskin, and wearing a wreath on his head or held in the hand. A representation of such a creature, assimilated with a local deity, similar in appearance (supposedly in the hybrid manifestation Beso-Satyr or Satyr-Bes), would appear quite appropriate in a tavern in a frontier zone as a legacy of many centuries of Greco-Roman cultural influences.

An interesting parallel to the above is the scene painted on the vase 8216 from the “Romano-Nubian” cemetery at Karanog (only some 30 km NE from Qasr Ibrîm), which shows a “Bacchic Scene” featuring four Besoids (Fig. 8 a). The description given by the excavators (in their comment on the form of the pot in question) is most eloquent:

“The grotesque figures, horned and tailed, that dance around this vase are somewhat like Bes, but the setting is not Egyptian. A player on the double flute heads the procession, behind come three prancing figures, each holding in the left hand a garland, in the right a wine-ladle which he seems about to dip into the tall classical amphora that stands before him. We might almost see here a reminiscence of Greek satyrs celebrating a Dionysiac orgy” (Woolley & Randall-MacIver 1910-a, p. 54).

There is little doubt that the scene on the vase from Karanog shows practically the same creatures as we see carved on the Qasr Ibrîm window-grilles. We see the same naked, stocky figures (this time, however, looking obese rather than muscular) having the same mane and tail with the characteristic “baboon’s” curve at its base. The wristlets, armlets and anklets, though featured a bit differently, are nevertheless there as well, as is the wreath, even though this time it is held in the hand and not worn on the head. The main iconographic difference (apart from the unusual dancing posture) seems to be the presence of small horns on the heads of the Karanog festive creatures, but this does not preclude their interpretation as Beso-Satyrs, since more or less discernible

horns may be seen in some other representations of the Besoids as well.<sup>33</sup>

As a matter of fact, various “satyrical” motifs are recognisable in later depictions of the Besoids. Occasionally they are shown revelling (Fig. 8b) (which is a standard feature of satyrs in the Mediterranean iconography - cf. Dazen 1993, p. 79), playing musical instruments,<sup>34</sup> dancing,<sup>35</sup> and, occasionally, “overheated” with sexual desire (Ballod 1913, S. 81; Stricker 1954). In light of such indications it would seem logical to conclude that the appearance of a Beso-Satyr depiction(s) in the Qasr Ibrîm tavern (a place of actual or metaphorical worship of Dionysos/Bacchos, the patron of the activities mentioned) was most legitimate and literally quite in place.

The question remains why a Besoid would be depicted as an elephant-bearer and/or a gazelle-bearer in a tavern of a frontier town like Qasr Ibrîm. The simplest answer would appear to be the most straightforward one: because the animals in both compositions seem to be *live*, they might be taken as allegorical images of the sacrificial animals for the Dionysian celebrations, if the tavern was perceived as a “sacred place” of Dionysos/Bacchos. In this case the elephant might be considered as a metaphorical, “Aithiopianised” substitute for the Mediterranean sacrificial bull, and the gazelle (or the antelope? - see above) might be a replacement of the traditional goat (cf. Lenormant 1877, p. 625, figs. 703, 705). Such an interpretation could probably look somewhat flat, but for want of a better one it might be suggested as a working hypothesis for a start.

Most intriguing and inevitable is further the question of whether there is any semantic connection between the image of the Elephant-Bearer from the Qasr Ibrîm tavern and its anthropomorphic counterpart found, but no longer extant, in the Royal Quarter of Meroe-City. Certain considerations in this regard the present writer plans to present in some detail in one of the future studies.

32 In the absence of captions, images of satyrs are often indistinguishable from those of silens, pans and fauns; on this problem see, e.g.: Wunderlich 1946, p. 35; Hedreen 1994, p. 47, n. 1.

33 Bell in the form of Bes (Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/551369>); scarab with a horned Besoid holding “two winged uraei & two lions inverted” (Beazley Archive: CPSC 22/X43 - <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/Gems/Scarabs/Images/Image%203/22.X43m.jpg>).

34 Krall 1889, S. 81, Figs. 66–68; Quibell 1908, pls. XLI–XLII; Hodjash 2004, p. 90. no. 53, 117, no. 91. Cf. Jesi 1962, pp. 266–267.

35 Quibell 1908, Pls. XLI–XLII; Delpech-Laborie 1941, pp. 252–254; Stricker 1954; Hodjash 2004, pp. 148, no. 210; 159, no. 225.



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#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Frühjahr 2023 wurde im Britischen Museum in London eine Ausstellung über hellenistische Kunst organisiert, bei der – etwas unerwartet – das erhaltene Teil eines Fenstergitters mit der Reliefdarstellung einer bestimmten Figur, die einen kleinen Elefanten auf den Schultern trägt, ausgestellt wurde. Dieses 1969 in Qasr Ibrim entdeckte Objekt (eines von mehreren ähnlichen, die in Fragmenten gefunden wurden) war bisher nur von der Fotografie in dem veröffentlichten Feldbericht bekannt und wurde noch nie ausgestellt.

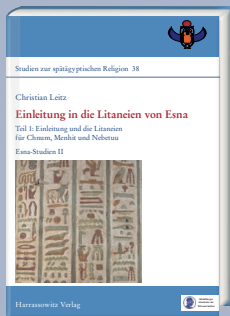
Im Zusammenhang mit der erwähnten Ausstellung erschien ein hochwertiges Foto dieses bemerkenswerten Artefakts auf der Website des Museums, das es erstmals ermöglichte, einige wichtige Details zu erkennen und einige neue Überlegungen zu seiner Semantik anzustellen. Die Arbeit wurde durch die Fotografien eines semantisch vergleichbaren Reliefs, das zusammen mit dem Elefantenträger gefunden wurde und dieselbe oder eine sehr ähnliche Figur zeigt, die eine Gazelle oder eine Antilope auf den Schultern trägt, erheblich beschleunigt, die der Ver-

fasser mit freundlicher Unterstützung aus London erhielt. Obwohl dieses Objekt weitgehend rekonstruiert wurde und seit 1991 im British Museum ausgestellt ist, war es lange Zeit von den an diesem Thema interessierten Wissenschaftlern aus den Augen verloren worden.

Ein Vergleich der neuen Fotografien hat überraschenderweise ergeben, dass der Tierträger (höchstwahrscheinlich ein und dieselbe Person in beiden Episoden) einen Schwanz hat, so dass die bisher allgemein akzeptierte Interpretation dieser Figur als „Mensch“ falsch ist. Die ikonographisch engsten Parallelen zu der vorliegenden Kreatur scheinen die bekannten Figuren zu sein, die auf mehreren Objekten im Grab von Yuya und Tuya aus der 18. Dynastie im Tal der Könige in Ägypten abgebildet sind und gewöhnlich als Prozessionen „tanzender“ Bese (oder genauer gesagt Besoiden) identifiziert werden. Interessant ist auch der recht ungewöhnliche Kopfschmuck des Gazellenträgers, der dem Kranz auf dem Kopf des Gottes Dionysos, wie er auf dem so genannten „Kelch des Kallis-Malers“ abgebildet ist, etwas ähnelt.

In Anbetracht all dieser Überlegungen ähneln die zur Diskussion stehenden Bilder auffallend den vier festlichen Teilnehmern der „Bacchischen Szene“, die auf der Vase 8216 aus dem „römisch-nubischen“ Gräberfeld von Karanog, ganz in der Nähe von Qasr Ibrim, dargestellt sind.

Das Vorhandensein solcher Figuren (die offenbar als Beso-Satyrn zu behandeln sind) in den Fenstergittern des Hauses, das nach den Schlussfolgerungen der Ausgräber mehrere Jahrhunderte lang als Taverne diente, d. h. als ein Ort, der buchstäblich oder metaphorisch Dionysos/Bacchos gewidmet war, in einer Stadt, die eindeutig multikulturell ist und sich nahe der Grenze zum römischen Ägypten befindet, erscheint erklärbar und legitim.



Christian Leitz

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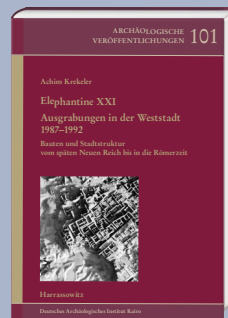
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