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SOME LOCAL ASPECTS OF THE CULT OF BES IN THE NAPATAN KINGDOM

From the beginning of the XVIIIth Dynasty the cult of Bes in Egypt, previously related to popular beliefs, has been accepted in the official credo as it has been shown in the temple of Deir El Bahari¹ where this god and the goddess Thoueris perform the role of midwife during the birth of Hatshepsut and her Ka, in front of the souls of Pe and Nekhen.²

The presence of this dwarf divinity³ in monumental architecture is attested in Upper Nubia (Amara West and Gebel Barkal)⁴ and in the Butana region (Meroe and Naga,⁵ Musawwarat es-Sufra⁶), in particular during the Meroitic Period when Bes is engraved on templar columns and pillars under the influence of the Greco-Roman mammisi. Only at Barkal we have an earlier evidence of Bes in the local architecture: the remains of one of the colossal Bes caryatids coming from room B 301 of the temple dedicated to Mut, built in Napatan times. The image of Bes inside the temple of Mut B 300 at Barkal is obviously related to the myth of the Eye of Re as the one who calmed with his music the fury of the lioness Hathor-Tefnut during her back trip to Egypt from Nubia. However, the local epigraphy lacks so far any direct link to his cult.

However, during the Napatan dynasties, Bes image is frequently present among the components of jewelry and as amulets left inside the burials due to his apothropaic role, especially in non-royal tombs.⁷ In general, Bes-amulets followed the standard models of the Third Intermediate Period and the Late Period: lion-rounded face, flat nose, wide mouth with thick lips, sometimes a feathered headdress on the head, and a necked dwarf body with arched and short legs. In Nubia, among the amulets



Fig. 1: The Bes-jar from tomb 772 of Sanam necropolis, unpublished photograph, © Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton and Hove.

of that period, we do not find images of Bes with any kind of “accessory” (knives, drums/tambourines, snakes). They were made mainly out of faience, glazed paste, and rarely of ivory, bronze and silver; they show sometimes some holes over the body for suspension as part of a bracelet, a collier or simply they were used as a pendent.

Bes presence is also attested in sculptured jars belonging to funerary equipments (but in Nubia not before the Napatan period), only in Sanam (fig. 1)⁸ and in South Meroe necropolises,⁹ where the influ-

1 Lower row, central section of the Middle Colonnade/Northern wall.

2 Naville 1896: 16, pl. LXI.

3 On the connection between achondroplasia and birth protection see the exhaustive article by J. F. Romano 1998: 98.

4 PM VII: 157, 209.

5 PM VII: 236, 263.

6 Hintze 1971: pls. 89, 93.

7 Of all the amulets depicting this god, only 8 examples came from the royal burials of El-Kurru but they are completely absent in the necropolis of Nuri.

8 For the image in fig. 1, I would like to thank Dr. M. Serpico (curator at the Petrie Museum) and H. York, (curator at the Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton and Hove).

9 In Sanam necropolis: tombs 772 (no skeletal remains) and 860 (burial of an adult and his child), see Lohwasser 2012: 468, 473. In South Meroe: tomb S32, see Dunham 1963: 374.

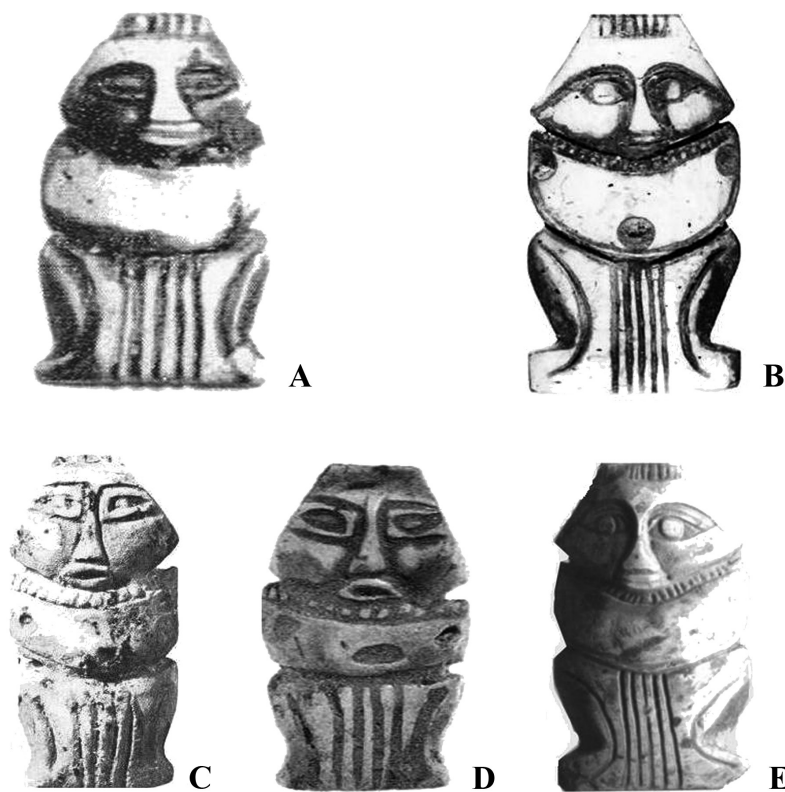


Fig. 2: The Napatan series of Bes amulets (objects not in scale). A: after Verwers 1961: 26, pl. V, c; B: courtesy of Dr. J. House Wegner (Penn Museum, Philadelphia); C: Vila 1980: fig. 61/4, 69; D: Spencer 2002: 6, pl. 8, n° 322; E: © Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, image Griffith Napata #253.

ence of the royal court allowed a major cultural affinity to the traditional canons of Pharaonic Egypt. In fact, the wheel made jars with Bes face molded in relief: big eyes, moustache, small arms, is no doubt, Egyptian jars imported and deposited in middle class burials. The shape of the vase and the type of decoration applied on the surface fits well into a Late Period dating (VIth century) as other parallels can suggest.¹⁰

The aim of this short article is to present a Kushite model of Bes figurine exclusively made in Nubia¹¹ which has never been a major issue of any studies so far,¹² presenting a few unpublished samples.¹³

10 Aston/Aston 2003: 95-113.

11 In fact, this particular Bes-image is not present in the old catalogues of Egyptian amulets as that of Reisner 1958: pl. III, IV, VII, VIII, nor in the much more recent monograph of Andrews 1994: 39-40.

12 The only specific study on the Bes iconography in Nubia does not consider this type of figurine. See Jarosław 1992: 202-205.

13 A first attempt of catalogue and analysis of these items has been made by the writer in his unpublished PhD thesis: *La période napatéenne en Nubie : traditions nubienne et influences égyptiennes dans le monde funéraire* defended in July 2013 at the University Charles De Gaulle – Lille 3, Villeneuve-D’Asq, France.

This type of Bes or “pseudo”-Bes (whenever it may represent another local and dwarf divinity associated to the Egyptian one) in a frontal view, features a typical pentagonal face on a nearly flat surface, big almond eyes, a triangular nose, a very small mouth with common thick lips (except for sample B, fig. 2) and a flat back.

I recognized five items found in Soudan between the Ist and the IIIrd cataract: two in Lower Nubia (Buhen, Faras), two in Upper Nubia (Abri, Amara West), unfortunately for the last item the place of its discovery is unknown. All of the items of which we know the provenance have been uncovered in a non-royal context and in tombs approximately dated to the Third Intermediate Period/Napatan Period.¹⁴ This is the case of sample A, C, D, found in a burial containing other objects, mainly post-New Kingdom pottery, fitting

well a date between VIIIth to VIIth century BC, or in empty burials located within a group of other well dated sepultures.

This is the collection recorded so far which is presented in the table below, and it can be seen in fig. 2.

All these items have a typical exemplified body shape consisting of three components belonging to a single element: a pentagonal head, a toroidal chest (A, C, D) or a semispherical one with a concave top (B and E) with no trace of arms and hands, and an almost trapezoidal bottom with arched and sketched legs without feet. Five vertical lines in the central part of the bottom figure a very sketched jabot, they are lightly incised in two samples (C, E), incised and painted in another two example (A, B) and only painted in the last one (D). Traces of dark varnish are also present over the eyebrows, the eyes, the lower part of the face and the lines of the legs in A, B, D.

The top of the head has another series of vertical and incised lines in almost three specimens (A, B, E), they seems likely to represent what we generally find

14 In my opinion, this tomb could represent a typical case of re-occupation burials of the New Kingdom, frequently recorded in Nubia in Kushite times.



Object	Findspot	Material	Sizes	Present location	Description
“Sample A”	Faras Region, found probably inside a cairn sand burial (tomb 27c ? in the desert)	faience	unknown as not published ¹⁵	unknown	pentagonal head with five vertical incised and painted lines on the top as remains of a feathered headdress? The face shows almond incised eyes, plump and horizontal lips. The chest is toroidal. Five incised and painted lines represent a sketched jabot. The arched legs are made by incision and painted. An indistinguishable varnish layer covers the part under the chin. Hole/loop no recorded.
“Sample B”	Buhen, New Kingdom necropolis “K”, tomb K3 (a multi-chambered staircase tomb) ¹⁶	green glazed steatite	3,7 cm high	Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia (collections storage), inv. number E10714	pentagonal head with seven vertical incised and painted lines on the top as remains of a feathered headdress? The face shows almond incised eyes no lips but a horizontal line as a hint of smile. The chest is semispherical with a concave top. Five incised and painted lines represent a sketched jabot. The arched legs are made by incision and painted. A dotted collier under the chin may represent the beard. A lateral hole is on the top of the head.
“Sample C”	Abri-Missimonia, necropolis 2-V-6, from tomb 2-V-6/192 (a rectangular burial with a side chamber)	probably made in sandstone ¹⁷	6 x 3 x 1,5 cm	unknown	pentagonal head with three vertical incised lines on the top as remains of a feathered headdress? The face shows almond carved and big eyes which have been cut off by the two later sides of the face. Plump lips and opened mouth. The chest is toroidal. A dotted collier under the chin may represent the beard. Five curved lines represent a sketched jabot. The arched legs are made by incision and painted. Hole/loop no recorded.
“Sample D”	Amara West, New Kingdom Cemetery C ² ¹⁸	green faience	1,6 x 1 x 0,3 cm	Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm, inv. number MM 30658	pentagonal head with nine vertical and incised lines on the top as remains of a feathered headdress? The face shows almond carved and big eyes which have been cut off by the two later sides of the face. Plump lips and opened mouth. The chest is toroidal. Four painted and vertical lines represent a sketched jabot. A dotted collier under the chin may represent the beard and every pearl framed by a dark varnish. The arched legs are painted. The sample was pierced at the back of the head for suspension
“Sample E”	Probably Kawa or Napata region, it may belonged to the General H. Jackson's collection in Merowe ¹⁹	unknown	unknown	Merowe Museum?	pentagonal head with no lines on the top. The face shows almond carved eyes with defined eyebrow and pupil. Plump and horizontal lips with a hint of smile. The chest is semispherical with a concave top. Five vertical and incised lines represent a sketched jabot. Tear shaped hair of the beard. The arched legs are marked by two curved lines. Hole/loop no recorded.

15 Verwers 1961: 26, pl. V, c.

16 MacIver/Woolley 1911: 198, 233. The object is just quoted and no image was published. Image in fig. 2 courtesy of Dr. J. House Wegner (Penn Museum).

17 I can infer the nature of this material by Vila's description of the artifact in Vila 1980: fig. 61/4, 69: ‘...Bès (?), en pierre

tendre jaunâtre’.

18 Spencer 2002: 6, pl. 8, n° 322.

19 Image courtesy of the Griffith Institute, from F. Ll. Griffith's photobook (image Griffith Napata 253) in the Griffith Institute, Oxford. A few notes on this general can be found in Macadam et al. 1955: 2.



Fig. 3: The Bes recently found at Amara West, after Binder 2011, pl. 12, 46.

in the Egyptian Bes of the same period, i. e. a lower attachment of a feathered headdress which, in these Nubian models, has never been made.

Big eyes have been cut off by both the two lateral sides of the face in two cases (C, D), these are the ones which look more alike each other among all the specimens of the series. In fact, they come from two necropolises very close to each other (Abri-Amara West) and located in the same region, just in the southern part of the Dal cataract. On the basis of these stylistic elements we can suggest that they probably come from the same workshop. They are the only ones to have a small opened mouth, while the other examples show a hint of a smile (A, B, E). In the majority of the samples (B, C, D), a sort of a dotted collar under the chin seems to represent the hair of a small beard, whilst in another model the beard hair has a tear shape (E). A further sample (A), only known by a photo taken in a 1960' survey, seems to show a dark varnished layer covering the entire surface around the lower part of the face, not able to recognize the beard.

The finest samples of this Bes collection are specimens B and E. In fact, the traits of the face are rendered with care and realistic definition of eyes, eyebrow and pupil; the first one may also had probably inlays of other material over the small circles laying at the level of shoulders and the navel.

Once again, from the site of Amara West, in particular from the "Cemetery C", a further uncommon Bes amulet,²⁰ F9453, has been recently discovered

inside a niche burial having a tumulus superstructure, Grave 216²¹ (fig. 3). It is dated to the New Kingdom but it was clearly reused for later burials in the following periods. In fact, this tomb was heavily disturbed and frequently re-opened along the centuries. A later date can be suggested as this amulet is associated with other amulets of the same grave which are typical of a Third Intermediate Period/Napata Epoch: a lapis-lazuli seated Isis suckling the child Horus, a green faience Pataikos with a snake in his mouth and contemporaneous pottery.

The all-round statuette is made in ivory, has typical arched legs with defined feet, big buttocks with a log tail reaching the bottom of the base;

arms are present and are hanged on the bell. The face is stylistically speaking unique: the oval shaped head is surmounted by a feathered headdress of which the top is very like the one of the specimens studied above, but the traits are completely different. Small oval ears show horizontal bands, probably representing hairs. The eyes are not sculptured, perhaps they are rendered as been closed, cheeks are oval and higher than usual, reaching the transversal lines, a sketched way to represent the eyes. A sort of moustache frames a very small mouth closed by a short beard lightly traced up to the eyes. A parallel but with a fatter body, belonged to a private Swiss collection (fig. 4), has been recorded by J.-L. Chappaz in the 80', but its provenance is doubtful, and the dating does not match the one of the Amara West specimen.²²

In conclusion, we are able to say that in the 1st millennium BC, after the Egyptian withdrawal, Kushite artists continued their activities following Egyptian canons. But they also introduced new forms of amulets vaguely similar to the original models. A vividly active region in this period was Amara West, where innovative specimens were perhaps locally produced and created. The refinement of Napatan culture consists of a cultural

20 I do not include this specimen to the group of Bes studied in this article as it does not present the same features: a pentagonal head and a sketched body.

21 Binder 2011: 46, pl. 12 & 13.

22 Chappaz 1981: 93 (n° 049).



Fig. 4: The Bes of a private Swiss collection, after Chappaz 1981, 93.

synthesis, following the principle of adaptation of models, in order to express canons (funerary or not) respecting Egyptian traditions, and, at the same time, indigenous forms. Therefore, artistic experimentation took place creating a local trend, probably coming from a melting pot between popular background and poorly known traditions. As a solar and prophylactic image, Bes had a very good reception in both official and popular beliefs until the Meroitic period. We hope that new discoveries from the field can enlarge the collection of these Bes with pentagonal face adding new local variants of the same divinity.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Ikonographie des Bes in Nubien im 1. Jt. leitet sich von der Tradition des Neuen Reiches als solare Manifestation und Schutzgottheit ab, wie sie in Tempelarchitektur und Grabbeigaben vorkommt. Jedoch konnte festgestellt werden, dass eine lokale Produktion von Amuletten, inspiriert durch das stereotype Bild des ägyptischen Gottes, aber mit einer innovativen physiognomischen Erscheinung (fünfeckiger Kopf) geschaffen wurde, die aus Ägypten bisher nicht bekannt ist.