



ALEXEY K. VINOGRADOV

DWARF ON BIRD. A CURIOUS REPRESENTATION OF BES.¹

In 1912 Boris Turayev published a series of objects representing the god Bes (or rather a number of Besoids, since there are no explicit written identifications on the objects),² from the former collection of Vladimir Golenischev. Among these was a tiny terracotta vessel (max. height 64 mm) representing a dwarfish figure sitting on a bird. Quite unusual in form, this object, very cursorily mentioned in the text of the paper but reproduced in one of the attached plates, was interpreted by the scholar as a lamp in the form of “Bes, sitting on a goose” (Turayev 1912, p. 3; pl. IV, fig. 3).

About a century later the same rendering was reproduced in Svetlana Hodjash’s catalogue of the former Golenischev collection of the images of Bes (currently in possession of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), with the addition, in the brief notation, of the dating: “Hellenistic Period” (Hodjash 2004, p. 158, no. 224).

More recently the object in question was revisited by Olga Vassilieva and Svetlana Malykh in an article discussing eleven ceramic objects from the aforementioned collection in the Pushkin Museum. According to this study, the Bes-formed “lamp” was one of the three miniature ceramic vessels of unknown provenance, purchased by Golenischev in Egypt, and, in the authors’ opinion, identifiable as the Memphis Black Ware (Vassilieva & Malykh 2016, p. 982). The rendering of the above “lamp” was reconsidered due to the absence of any remains of lampblack, characteristic of lamps and censers, and

a new identification as an *askos*-vessel was suggested (*ibid.*, p. 983, n. 3).

As for the iconography of the object (*ibid.*, p. 984, fig. 2), the earlier view by Turayev (see above) was retained. Pointing out the singularity of the composition, the authors have observed that the main character (obviously the god Bes, judging by its diminutive body and such usual attributes as the beard, moustaches, and apparently the mane, as well as the remains of the characteristic headdress of plumes) is represented in the attitude better known by the images of the god Harpocrates, with whom the former appears to have occasionally been somehow associated in Late Period religious monuments (*ibid.*, p. 983). At the same time it was pointed out that “the ‘rider’ motif (and that of the ‘mock fighting with animals’) comes back to Greek genre tradition of representing the young Eros (as well as ordinary children)” (*ibid.*, p. 983).

The interpretation presented by Vassilieva and Malykh looks worth considering, yet an alternative rendering of the composition on the vessel under discussion might also be set forth.

The combination of images of a diminutive man, or dwarf, and a bird, giving the scene a hint of comedy, so characteristic of many pieces of art from the Graeco-Roman and the Hellenistic periods (to which, it will be recalled, this *askos* is also attributed/-able) might bring about a number of associations, based on some visual and literary parallels.

Apart from the above-mentioned comparison with representations of the god Eros/Cupid as a romping little child, the Dwarf vs. Bird scene might call to mind the Classical tradition, quite variously conveyed in arts and literature, about the tiny folk of the pygmies, allegedly living on the outskirts of the inhabited world, and waging wars on the cranes, in winters flying out of Scythia to the marshes near the sources of the Nile and pecking the little men’s crops.

Traceable already in Homer’s *Iliad* (III. 2-7) this theme, known as *Geranomachia*, became more and more elaborated, in a most specific way reflecting the progress of geographical knowledge in the Graeco-Roman world.

1 I am very much indebted to the administration of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow for providing me with the photographs of the object under discussion with a permission to publish them in the present article. To Dr Timothy Kendall I am grateful for reading this paper and improving the style.

2 The identification of the Bes-like creatures in the absence of a definitive written appellation is in fact problematic in view of numerous enough multi-figured compositions, showing up to eight more or less similar deities with different names. In these circumstances the term Besoid would look as a useful palliative. This issue is to be discussed by the writer in a forthcoming paper.



Fig. 1a: Frontal view, Terracotta vessel from the former Golenischev collection, (GMII I, 1a 2856, © The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow).

In the course of time the little folk, apart from the more traditional stories about Egypt, Libya and Aethiopia (Hdt. II. 32; IV. 43; Pomp. Mela III. 8; Plin. *HN* VI. 35. 188; Philostr. *Imag.* II. 22), began to appear in reports about India and even Europe (Plin. *HN* VI. 22. 70; VII. 2. 26-27; Philostr. *Vit. Apoll. Tyan.* III. 47; cf. Plin. *HN* IV. 11. 44; V. 29. 109). The reports concerning little men no more than a fist, forearm, or three spans tall (*i.e.* 11 to 80 cm) went accumulating picturesque details to such an extent that it was already Strabo, apparently the greatest geographer of Antiquity, who started to reproach many of his predecessors for manufacturing tall tales about the pygmies.

Two details of the Pygmean *logos*, traceable in the Graeco-Roman writers' works in the form of the literary, mythological, geographical, etc. reminiscences, are of particular relevance here:

a) According to Athenaeus, quoting a certain Menekles, the enemies of the little men of India were not only cranes coming from the north but also partridges (Ath. *Deipn.* IX. 390 b). A curious relation by Megasthenes about the wars of the

pygmies of India, which, as Strabo points out, was also stated by Homer (with reference to the Nilotic pygmies), alleges that the partridges fought by the little men were of a goose's size (Strabo XV. 1. 57).³

b) The pygmies, as they advanced to the seashore, whereto the cranes used to arrive from the north, organised a sort of expedition from the hinterland (which, as Pliny remarks, lasted three months), the little men moving on rams and goats (Plin. *HN* VII. 2. 26). In the Athenaeus version the pygmies fighting with the cranes used partridges for the same purpose (Ath. *Deipn.* IX. 390 b).⁴

3 πρὸς δὲ τοὺς τρισπιθάμους πόλεμον εἶναι ταῖς γεράνοις (ὄν καὶ Ὅμηρον δηλοῦν) καὶ τοῖς πέρδιξιν, οὓς χηνομεγέθεις εἶναι· “(as for) the three spanners *<i.e.* the people three spans tall - A.V.>, (they) (- says Megasthenes -) wage war with the cranes - Homer relates this too - and the partridges, which (are alleged) to be (of) a goose big”.

4 Οἱ μικροὶ ἄνδρες οἱ ταῖς γεράνοις διαπολεμοῦντες πέρδιξιν ὀχήματι χρῶνται. “The little men who (keep on) waging war with the cranes use partridges (as mounts) to ride upon”.



Fig. 1b: Reverse view, Terracotta vessel from the former Golenishev collection, (GMII I, 1a 2856, © The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow).

It will be noticed that *partridges* are referred to by the classical authors in both cases: at first as one of the pygmies' adversaries (along with the more usual cranes), and then as a means of transport used in the battles with the birds. This probably gives us a clue to understanding the scene on the *askos* from the Golenishev collection.

In light of the Graeco-Roman writers' statements referred to above, the representation under discussion might be interpreted as a specific in form reminiscence from the *Geranomachia* (cf. Wüst 1959, Sp. 2067-2068).

The bird on which the little deity sits is conveyed very schematically, but in any case it is unlikely to be a crane to judge by the length of its neck and beak. The rendering of the bird as a *goose*, maintained in all of the three studies of the object available by now (see above) is quite demonstrative. It perfectly agrees with the allegation by Megasthenes, rather mordantly treated by Strabo, that partridges in the land of the pygmies grew up to a goose's size, which, according to one version, were, together with the

cranes, the little folk's enemy, and following the other one, were used by them for riding.

The somewhat stiff posture of the bird, most likely determined by technical causes such as the form of the terracotta vessel, allows an ambivalent rendering of the composition. The dwarfish deity may either be sitting on the body of a prostrated (perhaps slain) adversary,⁵ or, alternatively, may be riding on the back of a partridge,⁶ prepared to repel the cranes.

Such a composition with Bes (or a Bes-like deity) looks significant in context of the long-standing discussion about his probable origin. Interpreted as suggested, this representation would tend to link this grotesque character with the classical tradition about the little folks living somewhere in the marshes about the sources of the Nile, as if identifying him as an (equatorial) Pygmy.

5 On the motif "Pygmy carrying the body of a dead crane" in Greek art see Dasen 1993, pls. 63.3; 70, 2.

6 On the motif "Pygmy riding on the back of a crane" (as a development of the "riding on the back of a partridge" ?) in Greek art see Dasen 1993, pl. 62, 1, cf. 39, 1 (riding on an ostrich ?), pp. 170, 183.



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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ein kleines Terrakottagefäß, das eine Zwergenfigur darstellt, die auf einem Vogel sitzt und aus der früheren Sammlung von V.S. Golenischeff stammt, ist heute im Staatlichen Puschkin-Museum der Schönen Künste in Moskau aufbewahrt. Drei frühere Studien haben es als Darstellung von „Bes auf einer Gans sitzend“ interpretiert. In einer kürzlich erschienenen Arbeit wurde auch darauf hingewiesen, dass die Sitzhaltung der Gottheit in dieser merkwürdigen Komposition einige Parallelen zu den Darstellungen des ägyptischen Gottes Harpokrates aufweist, während das Motiv des „Reiters“ an die griechischen Abbilder des jungen Eros – spielend oder im Scheinkampf mit Tieren – erinnert. In der vorliegenden Untersuchung wird eine alternative Interpretation dargelegt, die nahelegt, dass diese aus der hellenistischen Zeit stammende Komposition wahrscheinlich mit der klassischen semi-mythologischen Tradition über die Pygmäen zu tun hat, die in der Nähe der Nilquellen leben und auf Kranichen und Rebhühnern fliegend Krieg führen, wenn sie im Winter aus Skythien fliegen. Eine solche Komposition mit Bes (oder einer Bes-ähnlichen Gottheit) erscheint im Kontext der langjährigen Diskussion über seinen wahrscheinlichen Ursprung bedeutsam, da sie darauf hindeutet, ihn als (äquatorialen) Pygmäen zu identifizieren.