



ALEXEY K. VINOGRADOV

A BESOID ROCK CARVING IN THE HIGH ATLAS MOUNTAINS, MOROCCO.¹

1.

Ever since 1948, a great mass of rock carvings, reflecting different skill-levels and dates, and surviving in different state of preservation, have been discovered in the course of explorations conducted in a series of stations on the slopes of the High Atlas Mountains in central Morocco (Rodrigue 1999). A number of these drawings are remarkable in that they suggest associations with certain figures and scenes known from monuments of the Nile Valley.

Among such compositions is a group of drawings depicting a strange standing creature in frontal attitude with both arms upraised, described in the research literature as “orant” or “man-in-prayer” (Antoniewicz 1968, p. 1; Rodrigue 1999, p. 54) (Fig. 1 a). Similar figures, in different styles, have been attested throughout North Africa, whether it be rock paintings in the central Sahara (Antoniewicz 1968), a drawing on a Carthaginian votive stela (Grenfell 1902, pp. 27, no. XVIII, 38, no. XLV), or an early Egyptian scarab (Wiese 1996, Taf. 2, nos. 26–28, 35).

Some of the High Atlas figures are bandy-legged (Fig. 1 b), their attitude resembling the equally well known representations (Fig. 1 c, d), sometimes believed to depict dancers (Antoniewicz 1986, p. 8), and probably implying that the drawing portrays a “dancing prayer-maker” or a “dancing-man-in-prayer”, etc.

For all the difference in styles one cannot fail to notice the typological similarity of such drawings with the figures of some creatures on the Egyptian so-called “button seals” datable to the period from the 6th Dynasty period on (Fig. 2 a–b).² In the com-

paratively recent study by André Wiese they are, not unreasonably, characterized as “Besgestaltiger Götter”³ (though it would seem more correct to qualify them as “(proto-)Besoids”),⁴ which deities, or demons, known from many Egyptian and Kushite (cf. Fig. 2 c) representations and texts, were not at all alien to music and dances.⁵

A few of the carvings attested in the High Atlas seem to show a variation of the basic pattern, presenting the bent-legged figure accompanied by objects, not always easy to interpret, either held in the uplifted hands or positioned beside them. This could, in fact, even raise doubts as to whether the figure is a “prayer-maker,” unless we suppose that the objects in question have something to do with religious acts supposedly depicted by such scenes (Fig. 3).

2.

Considered from this perspective, one drawing deserves special attention, for its potential importance, it would seem, has not yet been realized.

Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow for providing me with a photograph of the stela I, 1a 5622 (IG 4092), with permission to reproduce it as one of the illustrations attached (Fig. 4 b). As always, my deepest thanks go to Dr. Timothy Kendall for editing my English and suggesting emendations in the text of my paper.

2 Petrie 1925, pl. I, nos. 35 and 36; Wiese 1996, Taf. 2, nos. 19–25, 27, 29–34, 36.

3 Wiese 1996, S. 158, par. A.2., A.2a.

4 Because the image could actually depict *several different*, though kindred, creatures (cf. Ballod 1913, S. 12–13, 24–27), I prefer to use the term “Besoid” throughout this paper, considering it more correct for rendering those cases where the name of the deity in question is not explicitly indicated in the accompanying text, if any. Besides, this term, already attested in the past (cf. Grenfell 1902, pp. 22, 37), is shorter, and seems more practicable than the compound labels like “bärtigen zwerghaften Gottheiten” (Ballod 1913), or the rather obscure and, in my opinion, misleading “Bes-image(s)” (Romano 1980; Romano 1989; Romano 1998), and the one just quoted above.

5 Quibell 1908, pls. XLI, XLII; Romano 1989 b, pp. 203–205, no. 64; 217–219, no. 69 A; Tran Tam Tinh 1986, p. 103 (par. D: “Bès musicien”).

1 Forced to work on this article under the unhappy restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and having no access to a number of the important fundamental studies (as e.g. Jean Malhomme’s two volume *Corpus des gravures rupestres du Grand Atlas*, Rabat, 1959–1961), I have had mainly to confine myself to the literature accessible through the *Internet Archive* site and similar sources. Under these conditions, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Angelika Lohwasser for enabling me to acquaint myself with the valuable study by Wladimir Antoniewicz (Antoniewicz 1986). I am especially indebted to the administration of the

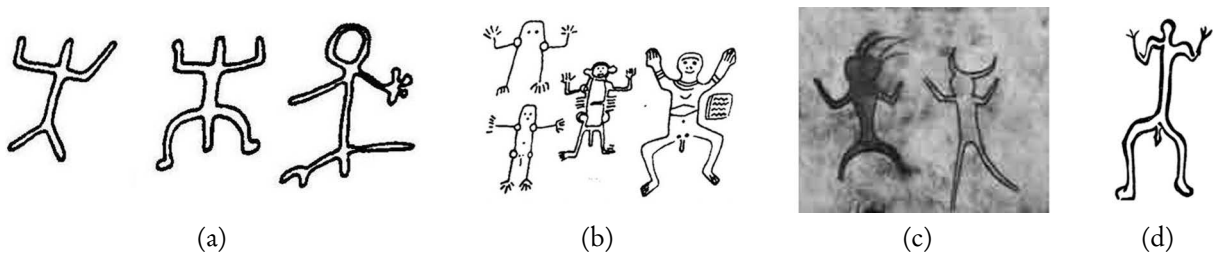


Fig. 1: Some representations of “orants” and “dancing prayer-makers”: (a–b) stations on the High Atlas (Rodrigue 1999, p. 55, types II and III); (c) Painting in Tassili n’Ajjjer, the central Sahara (Lhote 1959, fig. 23); (d) Rock carving on the Jebel Bes Seba, the Saharan Atlas, fragment (Frobenius & Fox 1930, fig. 2).

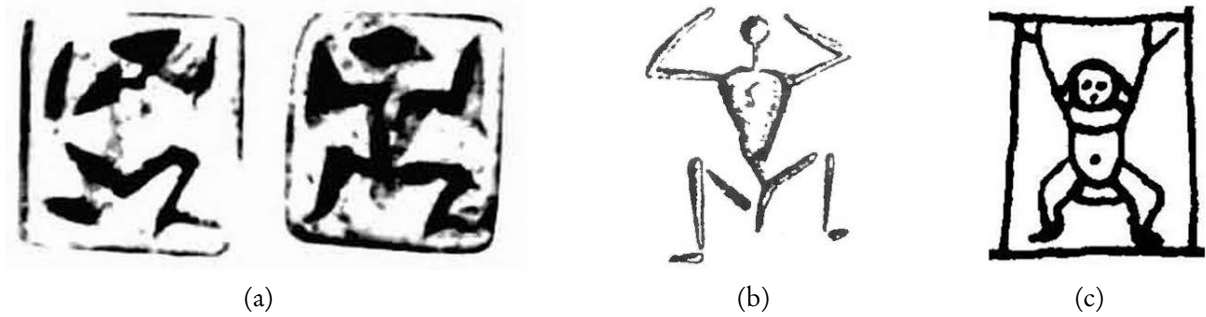


Fig. 2: “Dancing prayer-makers” in the Nile Valley representations: (a–b) Early seals (Petrie 1925, pl I, nos. 35–36; Evans 1897, p. 364, fig. 29); (c) Drawing on an ivory panel from Meroe, fragment (Dunham 1963, p. 169, fig. 121, no. 223).

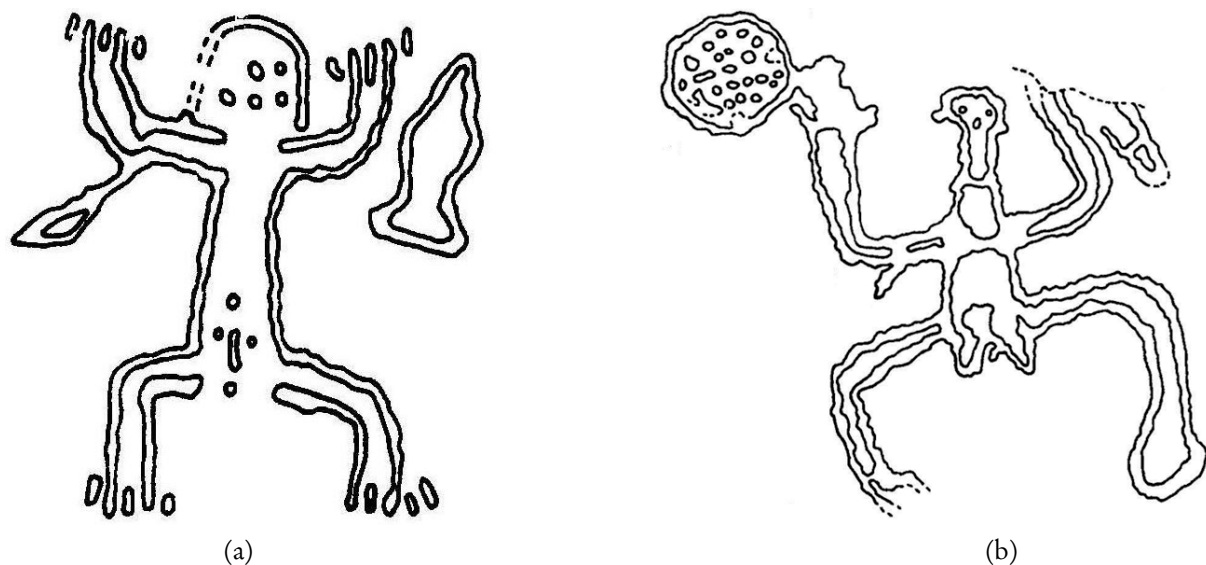


Fig. 3: The High Atlas rock carvings of “dancing prayer-makers” with some objects in hands: (a) male, plateau Yagour; (b) probably female, plateau Oukaimeden (Rodrigue 1999, pp. 299, no. Y/X/253; 183, no. O/VII/15).

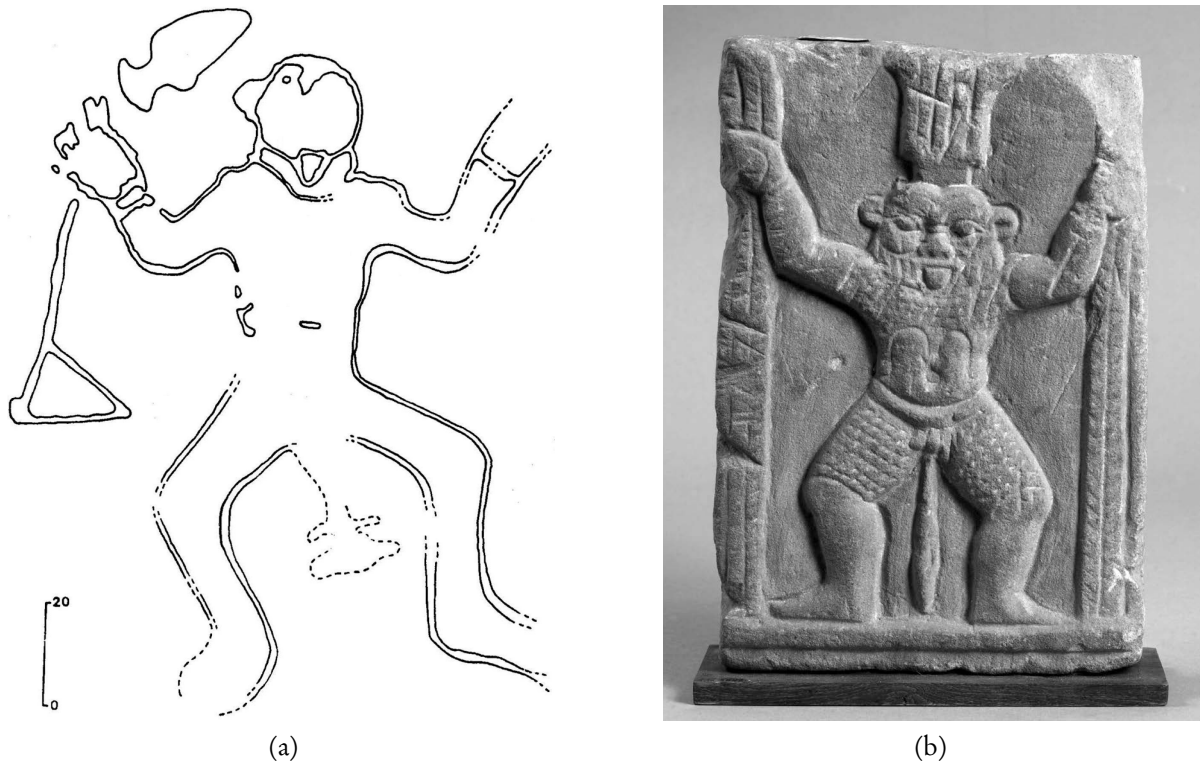


Fig. 4: (a) Rock carving on the plateau Yagour, station Fif Gaguine (Rodrigue 1999, p. 234, no. Y/II/70); (b) Relief of a Besoid on the limestone stela GMII I, 1a 5622 (© The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow).

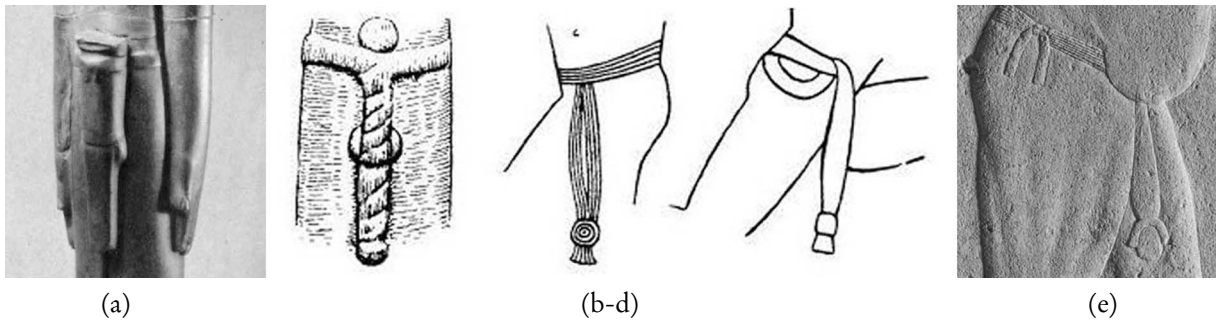


Fig. 5: "Libyan" penis-sheaths in Egyptian representations: (a) Early statue of "a Northerner, or Libyan" (Aldred 1949, pl. 1); (b-d) Egyptian reliefs (Evans 1925, p. 219, fig. 19); (e) Relief of a Fecundity Figure, fragment (Arnold 1999, p. 341).

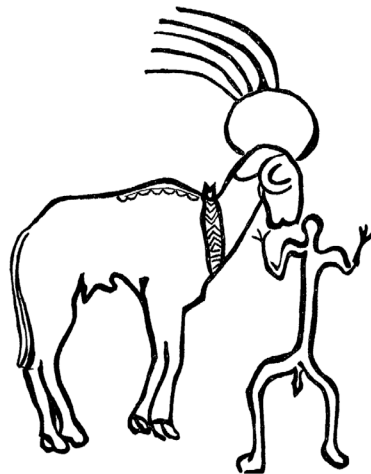


Fig. 6: Rock carving on Gebel Bes Seba (the Saharan Atlas) (Frobenius & Fox 1938, p. 24, fig. 2).

Found, along with over a thousand other pictures, on the plateau Yagour, 60 km south of Marrakesh (Rodrigue 1999, p. 234), it hardly surpasses most of the rest here in the quality of execution, yet is remarkable for some unexpected details. The carving shows, frontally, a figure with a well-proportioned slim body, with legs bent and feet turned out, holding something like a short sword in the upraised right hand/paw (Fig. 4a).

The attitude of the figure, with both arms/paws upraised, shows much resemblance to the aforementioned figures of the “dancing prayer-makers”, but some details seem to point to a certain modification of the basic pattern. The form and position of the surviving right ear (simian or human)⁶ indicate that a certain anthropoid creature is represented, which may also be assumed from the traces of a necklace⁷ (unless it is the lower edge of the beard), wristlet, and, probably, girdle, as well as two objects raised by the right hand/paw. A most important detail, of course, is the protruding tongue, a feature of a beast, showing that a being of a twofold nature, a therianthrope, is actually portrayed in this picture.

With all these observations in mind, one would easily be tempted to identify the figure represented in Yagour as an image of the Egyptian god Bes, or something inspired by him, in this particular stance. Though not very frequent in Besoid iconography, this attitude is nevertheless attested, as, e.g., by the limestone stela⁸ in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow (Fig. 4 b, Colour fig. 6), and the drawing on an ivory panel from Meroe (Fig. 2 c).

The High Atlas carving is also interesting in some points worth a separate comment. First, it will be noticed that the figure, while having the left hand free (the roughly sketched palm, or fist, of which survives almost completely and looks empty) holds simultaneously two objects in the right one.

The meaning of the lower object, with a strange triangle hanging down, is difficult to guess.⁹ As for the upper one, it is doubtless a weapon, looking like a dagger, or a short sword. Interestingly, the weapon is carved *completely outside* the fist that seemingly holds it,¹⁰ so that the question might arise whether

this object in the right hand might have been a later addition or correction, somehow altering the original semantics of the image. Without the dagger (and, perhaps, the second, obscure, object as well) the figure under discussion would probably look like an ordinary “dancing prayer-maker”, similar to those depicted elsewhere in the High Atlas and beyond (see Fig. 1), which may point to the existence of a certain relevant archetype in the minds of the authors of these quite different in style drawings. The presence of the dagger (along with the tongue sticking out), it should be stressed, contributes greatly to turning the dancer into a formidable Besoid,¹¹ although the weapon in both its length and shape differs considerably from the Egyptian types,¹² while resembling at the same time some local ones met with elsewhere in the High Atlas carvings.¹³

3.

Another detail of the Yagour figure to be pointed out is the absence of the tail so familiar (though not absolutely indispensable, it should be noticed)¹⁴ in Besoids in Egypt and beyond. In its place, between the bandy legs of the deity, a curious strange object, outlined by a dashed line, is seen, which might be taken for his genitals, loincloth, or – still more probably, to judge by its fanciful shape, – a “penis-sheath,” as it is called in the research literature.

the rest of the figure is outlined by a *double* line. If there is no draughtsman’s overlook, it should mean that the dagger is conveyed by a solid depression, which does not look very typical for the Yagour drawings. Cf. next note.

6 Note the figure very much resembling an ape among the “prayer-makers” (Fig. 1 b, centre).
7 The rendering suggested by the editor (Rodrigue 1999, p. 54).
8 Stela from the former collection of Vladimir Golenishchev, published by Svetlana Hodjash (2004, p. 68, no. 21) with no information about the provenance.
9 Could it be a very schematically drawn plant with a flower trailing?
10 The form of the weapon in the tracing published by Alain Rodrigue (see Fig. 4 a) is conveyed by a *single* line, whereas

11 Interesting to note, a dagger of a similar form (but contoured by a double-line) is in a similar way “added” to the hand (incidentally, to the *left* one) of a similar figure of a “dancing prayer-maker” (see above, Fig. 3 a), carved in a different place (station Aougdal n’Ouagouns) of the same plateau Yagour (Rodrigue 1999, p. 299, no. Y/X/253).
12 It will be noticed that the usual short sword in the upraised right hand of the Besoid in the aforementioned Moscow stela (referred to as a parallel to the Yagour carving – see Fig. 4 b) is replaced by something like a *feather* (or palm leaf?), which is a well-known in Egyptian iconography transformation (cf. Roeder 1956, S. 98–99, para. 139 c), apparently conveying the idea of military triumph.
13 Rodrigue 1999, pp. (69–)72. The type B5 seems to be the closest pattern.
14 Romano 1989 a, p. 48, note 119 (six entries enumerated); Romano 1989 b, pp. 51, fig. 1; 123, no. 38; Hodjash 2004, pp. 119, no. 99 (twice); Morenz 2019, S. 60, fig. 39 b (twice). It will also be recalled that “Female Bes-images rendered two-dimensionally never have tails” (Romano 1989 a, p. 48, see however note 118), which also looks applicable to sculpture in the round – see. e.g. Welsby 2004, pp. (156–)157, no. 142.



Known in various forms and, evidently, made of different materials, this element of men's apparel is well enough attested in ancient pictorial monuments in certain regions of the southern Mediterranean and North Africa.

In Egypt (Fig. 5), the penis sheath was recognized – already by the 19th century scholars – in quite a number of early representations, beginning with the Narmer Palette (Dyn. 0).¹⁵ An object of this kind is, further, very well seen on one of the so-called Fecundity Figures in a relief in the tomb temple of the Old Kingdom pharaoh Sahure¹⁶ (Dyn. 5), but best of all it is known by the numerous examples in monuments of Sety I (Dyn. 19) and Ramses III (Dyn. 20) where it is shown as a most characteristic feature of the defeated Libyans¹⁷ (which identification is clear from the accompanying text). Together with a beard of natural shape (a sign of a foreigner-barbarian in the Egyptians' eyes) its presence seems to have secured the rendering “Libyan” of similar attributes in some early, including predynastic, representations.¹⁸

One of the adherents to this rendering was Arthur Evans, who pointed out the functional similarity of the “Libyan” penis-sheaths with the corresponding object in some representations from Minoan Crete (Evans 1925, pp. 218–220). The general situation became still more intriguing when at least one figure with a penis-sheath was recognized among the rock paintings on the plateau Tassili n'Ajjer in the central Sahara,¹⁹ suggesting that a certain – apparently rather long – common cultural tradition in this regard may

have existed both in North Africa and the (southern) Mediterranean in antiquity.

Interestingly, the object under discussion as an attribute of the god Bes has once been pointed out, too, with reference to a certain representation in the Dendera temple (but without a reference to the exact location of the example in question and to the source of the attached, somewhat obscure, illustration, however) and with a mention of some sub-Saharan parallels (Pfister 1912). Upon a double check the picture in question proved comparable to one statue reproduced in Karl Lepsius' *Denkmäler* (LD IV. 83 c), but no clear example of the (“Libyan”) penis-sheath was found there.²⁰ Several other supposed examples with Bes wearing a penis-sheath might probably be pointed out with some reserve,²¹ but none of these, it must be admitted, looks unquestionable at closer study too.

Under these conditions the presence of such an attribute in the Yagour Besoid could be most interesting and helpful for the ethnic identification of the figure represented, if the carving were in a better state of preservation. In its present condition, testified by the published tracing, it would perhaps be more prudent to take the rendering suggested as probable though not yet proved.

4.

With all the obvious differences in style, quality of execution, etc., the striking iconographic similarities between the High Atlas figure and the Nile Valley Besoids are so evident that the question naturally arises as to who could have produced this image and when.

Several elements of its iconography might be helpful for ascertaining an approximate date for the Yagour drawing, if we consider it from the Egyptological point of view.

a) In Egypt, the (proto-)Besoids,²² shown frontally, with well-proportioned body, standing with

15 Quibell 1898, Taf. XII (Narmer Palette, middle register); Quibell 1900, pls. VII–VIII, no. 1, X, nos. 1–3, 6; XXI–XXII, no. 3; Naville 1900, pp. 68–71, pl. VI; Petrie 1953, pls. E 14 (The Two Gazelle Palette, obverse), F 15 (The Two Dog Palette, reverse), G 17–18 (The Bull Palette, obverse, reverse), K 26 (The Nar-Mer Palette, obverse); Wilkinson 1999, p. 137.

16 Arnold 1999, pp. (338–)341, cat. no. 113.

17 Medinet Habu II, pls. 68, 72, 73, 74, 75, 77, 78, 111, 113, 114, 118, 120, 121; Karnak II, pls. 116, 117, 118; Karnak IV, pls. 15, 15 A, 17, 17 A, 27, 31, 32. Allusions to this wear are sometimes recognized in the well-known shocking records of the “trophies” collected and counted by the Egyptians' after their victory over the Libyans (Chabas 1872, pp. 239–240, note 2; Naville 1900, pp. 69–71; for the sources see Medinet Habu I, pls. 22–23; Medinet Habu II, pl. 75).

18 Naville 1900, pp. 68–69; pl. VI; Capart 1903, pp. 374, 384–386; Capart 1904, pp. 31, 44, 54–56; Capart 1905, pp. 43–44; 156–158; Evans 1925, pp. 218–220, fig. 19, 225–226; Aldred 1949, p. 27, no. 1; pl. 1 (“a Northerner or Libyan”); Wilkinson 1999, p. 137.

19 Antoniewicz 1968, p. 5, pl. III, fig. 5; cf. Lhote 1959, fig. 44, pl. II; note also a possible parallel in fig. 37 (the so-called “Negro Mask” from Aouanrhet).

20 The relevant object certainly looks somewhat strange (as scrotum without penis?) and would rather remind the sheaths of the Minoan type (Evans 1925, pp. 219, fig. 20; cf. Higgins 1981, pp. 134, no. 164; 135, fig. 168; 155, fig. 192), were it firmly certain that the statue had no damages at the time when the drawing was made by Lepsius' draftsman.

21 Romano 1989 b, pp. 8–10, no. 2 (after Borchardt 1909, S. 70, Abb. 78); faience Besoid in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection (Accession number 09.180.2340 – https://archive.org/details/mma_bes_amulet_568908).

22 The attitude and morphology (well proportioned, slim body with legs bent and feet turned out) of the figures



practically ruled out. Puzzling though it would seem, bearing in mind the distance between Morocco and the Nile Valley, the assumption presents itself that the High Atlas carver may have been familiar with the image of the Egyptian grotesque deity (perhaps represented on some object like an amulet?).

In similar cases elsewhere (Near East, Mediterranean islands, etc.) it is not a simple reproduction of an Egyptian image, symbol, or motif, but rather a local version, with an adaptation, occasionally with some “alteration” of the original, that would often have taken place (Romano 1980, p. 48; cf. Abdi 1999; Abdi 2002). Something of this kind may be seen in the Yagour carving too, judging by the local form of the dagger in the right hand, and, if the above hypothesis is true, by the presence of a “Libyan” penis-sheath.

Still the key question as to how and when the (supposed) original would have penetrated the High Atlas to be eventually reproduced and modified, remains a puzzle, which for now the present writer sees no way to resolve without resorting to certain constructions that might look rather paradoxical.³¹

31 A most intriguing point about the Yagour Besoid is the fact that it is located in the Dra Valley of Morocco, a district difficult of access, where the habitat of an ethnic group of little people “precisely similar to the dwarfs of Equatorial Africa” was reported to have been observed by the American enthusiast anthropologist Robert G. Haliburton in the late 1880ies (Haliburton 1897, p. 60; cf. Haliburton 1891, p. 13; 1894, p. 12). Under such conditions it would seem very tempting to conclude that the mentioned carving represented some of the Moroccan “little men” in an Egyptianizing style, à la Bes(oid). Or perhaps it was left by a certain visitor, who was aware that the human aspect of this Egyptian deity (and his parallels), twofold in nature, was based on the image of a *pygmy*.

The Mediterranean world must have become aware of the presence of the short-statured people somewhere in the area of the Pillars of Herakles (Straights of Gibraltar) rather early, judging by some prompts in the mythical cycle about the hero’s Labours. According to the version recounted by Philostratus the Elder (*Im.* II. 22), Herakles, while wandering in “Libya” in search of the rejuvenating golden apples, was attacked by a host of the pygmies after he had killed in a wrestling bout their relative, the giant Anthaeus (cf. Vinogradov 2014, pp. 228–230). The grave of Anthaeus, as some Graeco-Roman geographers state, was in Tingis (Plut. *Sert.* 9; Strabo XVII, 3. 8; Pomp. Mela III, 10), a city in “Mauretania”, usually identified with Tangier in the northernmost part of Morocco.

The Moroccan localization of the little folks is further well in agreement with Herodotus’ account of the travel undertaken by a certain Sataspes, a Persian, who made an attempt, by order of “King Xerxes” (who ruled Egypt as a pharaoh of Dyn. 27) to circumnavigate “Libya”, i.e. the African continent. He set out on an Egyptian ship and with an Egyptian crew, but sometime after passing the Pillars of Herakles and sailing southwards he – “for fear of the length and loneliness of the voyage” – turned back halfway and sailed for Egypt. The record of Herodotus

Whether this coarse rock carving could have been something like a primitive cult object – a sort of religious icon? – for the local inhabitants, or a traveller’s graffito left by a chance visitor to these hard-to-reach places, is not clear either. The only thing that can be stated with some certainty is the fact that the drawing in the Yagour plateau in the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco is apparently the westernmost representation of a Besoid figure attested so far, and one attested *in situ*. Although he has some distinct features, he does seem strikingly similar to some Egyptian counterparts. Being their most distant relative in the literal sense of the word, he looks like the Nile Valley dwarfish deity’s cousin at the very least.

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mentions that, on his way back, Sataspes repeatedly put in to the coast of “Libya” in order to obtain provisions, and saw the “little men” (ἄνθρώπους μικρούς) who, out of fear, would leave their places and flee to the *hills/mountains* (Hdt. IV, 43).

The same author also writes about a still earlier expedition (which lasted more than two years), with a Phoenician crew, which was sent by the pharaoh “Neco” (i.e., evidently, Necho I or Necho II of Dyn. 26) to sail around “Libya”, and which, we are told, was making prolonged stops of many months at “whatever part of Libya they might come” to procure provisions (Hdt. IV, 42).

In view of such prompts met with in Greek and Roman travel records one can come to wonder whether the drawing of the Besoid in the High Atlas plateau could not be something like a travel graffito, made by a foreign visitor who carved on the rock an image of a diminutive man in the form of a grotesque creature, whose features must have been well enough known not only in Egypt but throughout southern Mediterranean.

Incidentally, the very size of the drawing in question – about 130 cm in height (judging by the scale on the published tracing) – might be referred to in support of the above interpretation, for it corresponds well to the average height of an African Pygmy (Seligman 1957, p. 4: “under 150 cm (under 59 in.<ches>)”; cf. Seligman 1939, pp. 12: “<under> 58 ¼ in.<ches> (<under> 1.48 m)”; 38: “the average for males being 56 ½ inches <ca 143.51 cm. – A.V.>”). The Yagour carving could have been designed as a portrait, or rather a quick sketch, which – somewhat histrionically (or a bit ironically?) represented a native in a threatening attitude, with a protruding tongue, showing him not only full-face but also full-size.



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birgen bis zum Niltal und von der Mittelmeerküste bis zur südlichen Sahara bezeugt wurden. Einige der Figuren, die mit gebeugten Beinen gezeigt werden, als ob sie „tanzende Beter“ darstellten, ähneln sehr stark einigen Darstellungen von Proto-Besoiden auf den ägyptischen Skarabäen des Alten Reiches und bis zu einem gewissen Grad den entsprechenden anthropoiden Figuren auf den „Zauberstäben/Messern“ des Mittleren Reiches.

Von besonderem Interesse ist eine der Gravuren auf dem Plateau Yagour, die eine anthropoide Kreatur auf gebeugten Beinen mit erhobenen Armen zeigt. Der Dolch in der rechten Hand und die hervorstehende Zunge auf dem bärtigen Gesicht lassen praktisch keinen Zweifel daran, dass es sich hier um eine Darstellung des ägyptischen Gottes Bes (oder seinesgleichen) handelt, zusätzlich zu den Merkmalen, die bereits in der früheren Ikonographie gezeigt wurden: mit schlankem Körper und ohne Kopfbedeckung. Die wichtigen Details sind das Fehlen des Schwanzes (der – zugegebenermaßen – auch in ägyptischen Beispielen nicht immer gezeigt wird) und die wahrscheinliche Anwesenheit des als „libysche“ Penistasche erkennbaren Objekts, was darauf hindeuten könnte, dass es sich bei dem, was wir hier sehen, um eine lokale Anpassung des von zahlreichen ägyptischen Darstellungen bekannten Bildes handelt.

Wer und wann könnte diese rätselhafte Gravur auf der schwer zugänglichen Hochebene von Yagour im Hohen Atlasgebirge in Marokko hinterlassen haben, sind die bisher schwer zu beantwortenden Fragen. Man kann darüber nur Vermutungen anstellen, wenn man sich z.B. an die Aufzeichnungen des Herodots über die antiken Umsegelungen „Libyens“, d.h. des afrikanischen Kontinents, erinnert, als die Ägypter oder die ägyptisierten Phönizier angeblich an der Atlantikküste Afrikas landeten (und mehr oder weniger längere Aufenthalte machten) (Hdt IV, 42–43). Das Einzige, was mit hinreichender Sicherheit gesagt werden kann, ist die Tatsache, dass die zur Diskussion stehende Yagour-Figur offensichtlich die westlichste inzwischen bezeugte Darstellung eines Besoids ist.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In den 1950er Jahren wurde unter den zahlreichen Felsritzungen, die an den Hängen des Hohen Atlasgebirges in Zentralmarokko entdeckt wurden, eine Reihe von Figuren mit erhobenen Armen gefunden, deren Parallelen – gewöhnlich als „Beter“ oder „Männer im Gebet“ dargestellt – an verschiedenen Orten Nordafrikas von den atlantischen Küstenge-