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Eton College Myers Collection of Egyptian Antiquities Object Highlight: ECM822, A Faience Nubian Head

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Egypt's traditional ancient southern border was dictated by the natural riverine barrier of the first cataract region, around modern Aswan. South of this area was the land of Nubia, usually separated into Upper and Lower Nubia (or *Kush* and *Wawat* respectively). This area was less fertile than the Egyptian portion of the Nile Valley, but was nonetheless populated by a number of culturally distinct groups. Today these are known to scholars by the names: A Group, C Group, Pan Grave, and Kushites or Kerma people. The ancient Egyptians on the other hand defined the groups as *medjay* and *nehesyw*, among others, although to which Nubian populations these terms refer is often difficult to ascertain and remains a controversial topic. To the ancient Egyptians Nubia was a land rich in gold, cattle, and exotic goods but was populated by traditional enemies of Egypt. For this reason stereotypical representations of Nubians occur frequently in Egyptian pictorial sources to differentiate them from their Egyptian overlords (particularly during the Middle Kingdom and later). Nubians are portrayed with harsh facial features, dark skin, and particular hairstyles or wigs. They usually have flat noses and thick lips, with large eyes and occasional facial piercings; many of these features are not found on depictions of Egyptians. While these images

must disguise some trace of truth – a visual metaphor perhaps – they are certainly highly stylized and it is interesting to note that Nubians do not depict themselves in this same iconographic manner, such as the example of Hekanefer, the 'Prince of Miam', modern Aniba.¹



ECM822,
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A small faience head (ECM822) in the Eton College William Joseph Myers Collection of Egyptian Antiquities depicts the stereotypical Nubian characteristics discussed above, and is therefore almost certainly of ancient Egyptian manufacture. It is currently 53 mm high, 40 mm at its widest point (ear to ear) and has a maximum depth of 36 mm, but is unfortunately broken from the neck down. It has been carefully modelled and

¹ Simpson 1963: 9, fig. 7.

carved in Egyptian blue faience, and has also been glazed using the application method² – which has resulted in unglazed areas beneath the chin and ears, indicating that the figure was left to dry in a standing position. It is therefore possible to reconstruct this statuette as a standing figure, possibly similar in size and design to 1951.131 in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh³ or 1984.168 in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.⁴ Black manganese paint has been applied prior to its firing to indicate an intricate, braided, cruciform hairstyle (or possible wig). The presence of a probable hair ring is indicated by a drilled hole through the front lock of hair, this ring may have originally been made of gold or silver – as can be seen on the other comparable examples. Similar perforations can be seen in the ears of the figure and through the necks of two carved monkeys, one sitting on each shoulder of the character. Again, black manganese paint is used to give texture to the fur of the monkeys. Silver rings can in fact be seen around the necks of two monkeys on 1951.131 in the National Museum of Scotland.

Most depictions of Nubians in ancient Egyptian art are given stereotypical black skin colouring; however this particular example is made in blue faience. Faience was often chosen by the ancient Egyptian manufacturers for its symbolic properties. The ancient Egyptian name for faience was *'tjehnet'*, provoking ideas of luminosity or scintillation – thoughts particularly relevant to *shabti* manufacture in Egypt and the connections between the deceased and the resurrected sun god Re.⁵ Blue faience in particular then appears to have created connotations of fertility, rebirth and regeneration. Bianchi has convincingly argued that faience was produced in state affiliated workshops, under a certain degree of mysticism, probably within the confines of temple administration.⁶



ECM166,
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While the facial features of ECM822 are quite harsh it most likely depicts a woman, judging by the similar pieces named above. It is possible that a connection to religious ideas, indicated by the use of blue faience, may point to this lady being equated with a goddess of the Egyptian pantheon. The God Bes for example is often shown with similar Nubian characteristics in his iconography after the 18th Dynasty.⁷ This iconography develops to include a female counterpart to Bes, in the form of his mother, Beset who is frequently shown suckling her son in a comparable fashion to Isis and Horus.⁸ While ECM822 does not exhibit evidence of Bes being suckled, the example from the National Museum of Scotland (as illustrated in Aldred 1971) shows the woman offering her breast to a monkey, while another stands between her legs, paralleling the example from the Pelizaeus Museum. An ostrakon from Deir el-Medina (EA8506) shows a woman suckling an infant; the lady wears an elaborate wig or hairstyle reminiscent of that shown on ECM822 and it is possible

² Nicholson 2009: 5.

³ Aldred 1971: pl. 147, 242.

⁴ Friedman (ed.) 1998: [69], 106, 208.

⁵ Bianchi 1998: 24.

⁶ Bianchi 1998: 23.

⁷ Romano 1980: 46; and Graves 2012.

⁸ This mother figure can also be seen in a figure from the Pelizaeus Museum, Hildesheim, 0248, illustrated in Kayser 1969: 198, and a similar figurine in the Harer Family Trust Collection and illustrated in Friedman (ed.) 1998: [75], 109, 210.

that this may indicate that either the woman in the ostrakon is Nubian, or that there was a symbolic identity for the hairstyle and the role of motherhood, perhaps associated with the goddess Beset.

Aldred identifies 1951.131 with the goddess Bast, which here may simply be the product of confusion over the names Beset and Bastet. Aldred also states that 1951.131 is a unique representation from ancient Egypt of a person wearing a nose ring. However, ECM1666 in the Eton College Myers Collection depicts the god Bes, with indication of a small drilled hole for the placement of a now lost nose ring. A similar figurine to ECM822 is found in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1984.168)⁹ and likewise portrays two baboons accompanying a female figure, although in this example there is no aperture for a nose ring, supporting the claim that these three statuettes may be identified with the goddess Beset.

Needless to say, the iconography and origins of the Bes image have been the subject of much debate in the past, while the iconography of Beset is less well known and understood. It is this author's opinion that both are linked to influences imported from Nubia during the 18th Dynasty which were incorporated into existing iconography. Their domestic nature promoted their longevity and survival in the Greco-Roman world. Nonetheless, further research is needed into this culturally significant goddess, and will form the focus of future research by this author.

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