

Bes: Development of a Deity

Exhibition Catalogue

Object key

BMAG = Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Eton College = Eton College William Joseph Myers Collection

A. Bes: Development of a Deity



A1. 1969W1212 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Faience amulet of a Bes-deity between two Taweret-deities

22 x 19 mm

Date unknown

Provenance unknown

This small amulet depicts a Bes-deity standing between two Taweret figures. A suspension loop is located above the head of the central figure. Taweret was another household deity whose purpose involved protecting women through pregnancy and childbirth. Here ferocious appearance, a hippopotamus with crocodile tail, was most likely intended to scare away demons. In this example the Bes-image includes an animal tail, as well as a large lion's mane. These features may indicate that this deity's role was also apotropaic in this instance.



A2. ECM822 (Eton College)

Fragment of a faience figurine of the goddess Beset

53 x 44 mm

Late New Kingdom

Provenance unknown

The head of this goddess is flanked by a monkey on each shoulder, which links this object to the developing iconography of both Bes and Beset. Occasionally both can be shown as monkeys, as well as often depicted with monkeys around them. The cruciform style of the hair/wig on ECM822 implies a Nubian influence in the iconographic style, something that is confirmed by the stereotypical facial features. A large suspension loop is situated at the back of the neck, between the two monkeys.

Bes: Development of a Deity

B. 'Bes': The Origins



B1. ECM114 (Eton College)

Flat-backed faience amulet of a Bes-deity

30 x 13 mm

Possibly early New Kingdom

Provenance unknown

The god stands bow-legged, with arms resting on thighs and an animal tail drops between. A suspension loop has been fixed to the top of the head. The lack of definition of the human features may indicate that this amulet is of an early Eighteenth Dynasty type, although lack of detail means that this supposition uncertain.



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B3. 1969W2553 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Ovoid amulet of Bes-image in faience

24 x 10 mm

Possibly Late Period

Provenance unknown

This unusual shaped Bes-amulet includes a number of salient features related to the god's iconography. The *wedjat* eye symbol on the lower body of the front of the object indicates the syncretism of the Bes-deity into the iconography of Horus that can be seen during the Late Period. However, a lion mane can be seen on the back of the figure running vertically from the suspension loop on the back of the plumed headdress.

C. Anthropomorphism: From Lion to Man...



C1. ECM1666 (Eton College)

Faience amulet of Bes-deity

10 x 16 mm

Late New Kingdom

Provenance unknown

This well modelled amulet of a Bes-deity standing with bow legs and hands on thighs exemplifies the anthropomorphization of the deity's iconography during the Eighteenth Dynasty. The god is presented as a dwarf figure, with Nubian facial characteristics and a tall plumed headdress. The remains of a now broken animal tail and the large beard are reminiscent of the deity's original leonine form. The ears and nose have been pierced to accept some form of jewellery and a large suspension loop is located at the back of the headdress.



C2. 1969W4064 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Inlay of a dancing Bes-deity

70mm high

New Kingdom

Provenance unknown

The imagery preserved on this inlay was introduced during the New Kingdom when the Bes-image was given the role of musician. The deity is depicted holding a round instrument, possibly a tambourine or drum, in his left hand and is striding forward with his left leg giving the impression of dancing. In the god's right hand he holds a long animal tail extending from the small of his back which links this image to the original leonine form of the Bes-image.

D. Apotropaic Gestures



D1. ECM117 (Eton College)

Flat-backed Bes-head amulet

42 x 44 mm

Twenty-Sixth Dynasty

Provenance unknown

This flat-backed amulet depicts the frontal face of a Bes-deity. The curved ears are reminiscent of the god's leonine origins, while the flat nose with remains of a piercing may be indications of a Nubian influence over the iconography. The protruding tongue is an apotropaic feature designed to ward away evil from the bearer. The suspension lug is now missing from the top of the head and probably once went through a plumed headdress. The reverse of the amulet is blank.



D2. 1969W2342 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Flat-backed circular Bes-head amulet

78 mm diameter

Twenty-Sixth Dynasty

Provenance unknown

This example of a circular Bes-head amulet also depicts the deity frontally with leonine and Nubian iconography. Once again the tongue is depicted protruding from beneath the long beard. The typical 'Bes' plumed headdress forms part of the depiction and a now missing suspension loop was one located on the exterior of the amulet above the face. The reverse of the amulet has a crudely moulded *wedjat* eye motif that associates the Bes-deity with the healing and regenerative powers of Horus. This connection reflects the syncretising properties of the Bes-deities and other divinities within the Egyptian pantheon from this period.



D3. 1969W3740 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Baked clay mould for a Bes-head amulet

85 mm wide

Twenty-Sixth Dynasty

Provenance unknown

This clay mould indicates the manufacturing process of Bes-head amulets during the Late Period. The motif was carved into the clay mould ready to accept the faience paste for imprinting. The two holes on each side of the mould facilitate the insertion of wire or tools to help get the paste off the mould and could also have aided in the creation of a transverse suspension hole through the amulet in this case. Subsequent trimming and carving after moulding may have produced more intricate shapes.

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D4. 1969W2538 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Openwork Bes-head amulet

18 mm high

Twenty-Sixth Dynasty

Provenance unknown

This Bes-head amulet has been carved more intricately into an openwork example. After initial moulding the spaces between the face and the sides were cut away. The amulet has identical moulded faces on each side while a suspension hole is inserted through the face of the Bes-deity from top to bottom.

E. A Period of Syncretism



E1. 1969W2926 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Statuette of a Bes-deity
40 x 40 mm
Late Period
Provenance unknown



The Bes-deity in this example sports bird wings closed behind his back. The god has two pairs of arms pulled round over his front; the lower pair hold a knife in each hand. The typical bow legs can be seen, while the leonine ears remain on the head along with a shaggy, mane-like beard. A suspension loop was once located on the back of the deity's head beneath a now missing headdress. The entire

figure stands atop two snakes that extend from the back of the bird wings and then curl to the front around his feet. On the base of the object are depicted a number of fearsome creatures including jackals, snakes and scorpions. This object was likely intended to protect the bearer from these animals.



E2. 1969W655 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Statuette of a Bes-deity
75mm high
Late Period
Provenance unknown

Similar to 1969W2926 above this figure also has closed bird wings extending to the back. However, in this example the deity also has outstretched wings extending from the body with two arms supporting them. In his second pair of hands he holds a *was* sceptre and an *ankh*. Various animal heads protrude from his face and help to support a now missing headdress. The deity's genitalia, knee caps and feet have also been replaced with animal heads. A suspension loop is located in the middle of the back of the bird wings. The base of the figure is one again surrounded by a snake in this case one that is *ouroboros*, eating its own tail. Beneath the snake encircle a number of wild animals such as lions, hippopotami and scorpions. This statuette was also likely intended to protect the bearer from these fearsome creatures.

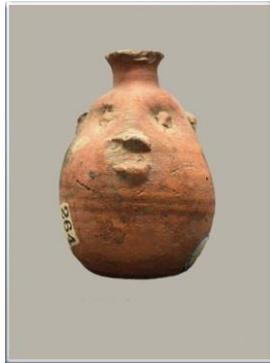
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E3. 1969W3078 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Fragment of an alabaster cippus of Horus
65 mm wide
Late Period
Provenance unknown

This fragment depicts the head of a Bes-deity over that of the head of Harpocrates (Horus-the-Child). The Bes-head is indicated by a long beard and moustache, but with the familiar rounded leonine ears. To the side of Harpocrates can be seen a scorpion and reflects the use of these objects in rituals to protect against malevolent creatures or to cure people from their affects.



E4. 1969W2133 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Bes-vessel, Astons' Type III
142 mm high
Twenty-Sixth Dynasty
Provenance unknown

This crudely formed bag-shaped Nile-silt vessel has been decorated with applied clay to form the face of a Bes-deity. The vessel has been wheel-made and likely contained some kind of liquid libation for use in a ritual. Aston and Aston's typology situates this vessel early in the development of the Bes vessels during the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty.



E5. 1969W2134 (BMAG ~ ex-Wellcome Collection)

Bes-vessel, Astons' Type V
215 mm high
Twenty-Seventh Dynasty
Lower Egyptian (Memphite/Faiyum tradition)

This well modelled vessel has also been decorated with applied clay to form the face of a Bes-deity. This example has also been fitted with a circular base and a handle that extends to the rim of its tall neck with flanged rim. This vessel has also been wheel-made, but this time out of a marl clay (probably A2 or A3) reflecting its likely provenance in the Memphite region of Lower Egypt. Again this vessel likely contained some kind of liquid libation for use in a ritual. According to Aston and Aston this example should be located later than 1969W2133, probably during the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty.

F. The Adoption of 'Bes' into the Classical World



F1. 1969A567 (BMAG)

Terracotta figure in the shape of a Bes-deity
105 mm high
Greco-Roman Period
Buto (Tell Fara'in)

This moulded terracotta is shaped into the figure of a Bes-deity. The image is hollow inside and an opening at the base may indicate that this object was used as a lamp within domestic ritual contexts. The item was once

painted red over the skin and had some applied decoration in thick white paint over the face, torso and base. The human elements in the iconography of the Bes-image are clearly visible, but the leonine ears have been retained, as well as the large mane-like beard surrounding the face.



F2. ECM1508 (Eton College)

Faience statuette of a Bes-deity secured into a wooden block
195 x 130 mm
Roman Period
Provenance unknown

This large faience statuette of a Bes-deity combines many of the iconographic features that the deity had acquired over previous millennia. The bow-legged posture with phallus and animal tail, as well as the leonine ears and shaggy mane-like beard are all

indicated. The tall plumed headdress and protruding tongue are also visible. The object is secured within an original block of wood which may evince a possible architectural setting for the item. Spurr et al. postulated that this object would have been situated within a wall niche in a domestic or ritualistic context.