

# The god Bes at Tell El-Ghaba, a site in the ancient egyptian eastern border

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## RESUMEN:

Este trabajo tiene el propósito de presentar las representaciones iconográficas del dios Bes halladas en Tell el-Ghaba, norte de Sinaí, Egipto, e inferir el papel que estos hallazgos pudieron haber desempeñado en la religiosidad de sus habitantes. Tell el-Ghaba yace la llanura costera del Sinaí, en lo que alguna vez fue el antiguo Delta oriental. Conforme al repertorio cerámico recuperado en el sitio, Tell el-Ghaba fue datado a comienzos del Tercer Periodo Intermedio-periodo Saíta temprano, cuando fue destruido y abandonado.

Palabras claves: Egipto-Tell el-Ghaba-Bes-Tercer-Periodo Intermedio-periodo Saíta Temprano.

## ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to present the god Bes figurines recovered at Tell el-Ghaba, in North Sinai, Egypt, and the role these finds may have played regarding the religiousness of its people. Tell el-Ghaba lies in the northern coastal plain of the Sinai Peninsula, in what was once the Eastern Nile Delta. According to the ceramic repertoire recovered at the site, Tell el-Ghaba was dated to the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period-early Saite period, when it was destroyed and abandoned.

**Keywords:** Egypt- Tell el-Ghaba- Bes- Third Intermediate-Early Saite Period.

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## Introduction

The god Bes, who is not located among the main gods of the Egyptian pantheon, (HELCK, 1975, p. 721; VELAZQUEZ BRIEVA, 2001, p. 420) is a strange figure for the Egyptian artistic canon without the solemnity of other deities. He looks directly at the viewer; instead of crowns, he wears a high plumed head-dress, and his face has rustic features: piercing eyes, a wide and flat nose, an open mouth that sometimes shows his tongue and an elaborated beard. He is sometimes shown brandishing snakes, holding knives or playing musical instruments such as flutes, strums or lutes, or he appears dancing. Bes does not reflect the Egyptian ideal of beauty because he has short and thick arms and legs, a prominent stomach, fat buttocks and a tufted tail (ROMANO, 1998, p.89).

In fact, the denomination Bes is not precise. Some scholars assume that it comprises a group of dwarf-like entities with a grotesque face. In fact, the denomination Bes is not precise. Some scholars assume that it comprises a group of entities characterised by a grotesque face and short stature. These entities are usually contained under the generic name of Bes (BONNET, 1952, p. 101). It seems that ancient Egyptians employed this name to depict different deities such as Bes, Aha, Tetetenu, Soped, Hayet, Amam, Ihty, Mefdjat, Menew and Segeb (ROMANO, 1998, p. 89), being Bes the most popular among them (BALLOD, 1913, pp. 11-14, pp. 24-26). It is not easy to classify them; texts do not specify if they refer to Bes or to another similar deity, and almost all of their numerous representations lack of explanatory descriptions (BONNET, 1952, p. 101).

F. Velazquez tells us that Bes has been and continues to be – even for Egypt, the cultural environment that has provided the largest amounts of data related to him – a confusing being in many aspects (VELAZQUEZ BRIEVA, 2001, p. 15). She affirms that the debate with regard to his identity still exists because of the different denominations given to representations of gods with the same or very similar iconography. According to this author, there are three possibilities:

- A single god with different names depending on such external factors as chronology, geographical area, iconographic nuances, etc.
- Different gods with different names, but with the same iconographic characteristics (although distinctive details can exist) and the same or very similar attributes.
- A unique god with different versions of itself whose names vary according to its functions.

She considers that the distinction could have been unclear also for the Egyptians, since it could differ between the canonical version and the popular one (VELAZQUEZ BRIEVA, 2001, pp. 21-22).

Due to his unusual figure, some Egyptologists suppose that Bes is not an Egyptian god and they indicate different places of origin (BRUYÈRE, 1939, p. 95; KEIMER, 1954, p. 141; BUDGE, 1969, p. 284; IONS, 1972, pp. 110-111; JÈQUIER, 1915, pp. 117-118; SPENCE, 1995, pp. 246). Other scholars attribute Bes an indigenous origin (BALLOD, 1913, pp. 18; ALTENMÜLLER, 1965, pp. 152-156; KRALL, 1889, p. 86; ROMANO, 1989, p. 220) and claim that he could be a purely Egyptian creation expressing an Egyptian concept of the South (DASEN, 1993, p. 63). Nowadays the fight is settled between an African, Sudanese or Nubian origin and an Egyptian autochthonous origin (VELÁZQUEZ BRIEVA, 2001, p. 26).

Some scholars have preferred not to classify Bes according to his corporal form or his garments but according to his attributes (BONNET, 1952, pp. 102-103). Bes gods have been categorised into three groups: 1) those Bes who bear knives and that are identified as fighters who repel evil to protect newborns or kill enemies of the sun; 2) those who execute music (MANNICHE, 1991, p. 57), usually shown playing a stringed instrument or the tambourine. In Greek times they are seen playing the trumpet and making dance steps. The performance of musical instruments is interpreted as a way to repel evil forces; 3) Bes gods that take serpents in their hands and to whom they hang. This kind of Bes already appears in the Middle Kingdom magic knives (ANDREWS, 1994, p. 39). These Bes could have provided protection during childhood, given the danger that would suppose for a boy the bite of snakes and scorpions that were usual in Egypt (VELAZQUEZ BRIEVA 2001, p. 422).

However, to fully understand Bes gods, it is important to discover their essence rather than to group them according to their attributes. They all have the same essence: they are apotropaic in nature (BONNET, 1952, p. 104). Already their aspect produces this effect, because both their ugliness and their grimaces scare. They have such a wide protection field that they can embrace all dangers that come from wicked powers; for that reason they take knives or frighten spirits with their music (PINCH, 1994, p. 44).

Bes is placed wherever the attack of dark forces is feared. His representations are hanged on furniture, heads of beds (BALLOD, 1913) and even on mirrors (ROEDER, 1956, p. 95) and toilette accessories because what the mirror reflects attracts wicked images,

while creams and makeup repel them. All these items were placed under Bes protection (BONNET, 1952, p. 104).

Starting from his basic general apotropaic feature, other traits are added to Bes. The dance and the music are not just a means of protection; Bes not only repelled wickedness but also offered happiness and rejoicing. Thus, Bes is a god that likes games and offers happiness. This kind of Bes can be related to baboons because they are seen either dancing with him or seated at his feet, and also playing around his crown and his head. In addition to the dance and games, wine also produces joy (GRENFELL, 1901, p. 140); that is why some jars of wine as well as cups and other drinking accessories are adorned with the head of Bes (BONNET, 1952, p. 104) or used to contain that element that produces happiness (DEFERNEZ, 2009, p. 176).

During his long history this dwarf-like god was a helpful deity concerned not only with the protection of the house but also with human life in general. He protected women by watching over their health and beauty, and by providing care during pregnancy and delivery. In difficult births, he displayed his protecting power driving away evil spirits and venomous animals. He aided women after childbirth, especially during the mother's period of seclusion and purification; he guarded people during the dangerous time of sleep when men were abandoned to malignant forces; he ensured triumph over human enemies; he contributed to the rebirth of the deceased and he entertained people with his music, dance and wine.

The idea that Bes warded off evil influences at the moment of birth became very important as it was in that trance that the attack of enemy forces was feared. During the king's birth – as illustrated on the walls of the Birth House of Queen Hatshepsut temple at Deir el-Bahari, where he appears attending the birth of the queen – and during the young Sun's god birth, Bes is also present together with other protective spirits. Bes keeps guard before the newborn; he also looks after him; he takes him on his shoulders (HALL, 1929: 1) and suckles him (HORNBLOWER, 1930, p. 16). Bes is even present in frustrated births; the foetuses were buried in wooden Bes-shaped coffins (BONNET, 1952, p. 105).

It seems that the role of Bes also extended to sexual life. Some discoveries made to the East of the Serapeum of Memphis indicate it (BONNET, 1952, p. 105).<sup>2</sup> In these

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<sup>2</sup> The complex consists of several rooms that, according to their decoration, possibly belonged to a sanctuary of the god. On the walls there are several high Bes figures and at his side there is a naked woman's figure, possibly a dancer with a sistrum and a tambourine.

rooms there were a large number of phallus figures.<sup>3</sup> It seems that at that place Bes was honoured as the giver of sexual force (MANNICHE, 1987, p. 35).<sup>4</sup> It is also not surprising to find representations of Bes with big penis among the Greco-Roman terracotta figurines (MARTIN, 1973, pp. 11-12).

Bes does not seem to have received an official cult during the dynastic period, but he was a popular deity most likely worshipped in domestic shrines within the home and represented in objects of daily use such as furniture, mirrors handles, makeup boxes, glasses etc. The god was present at Deir el-Medineh, where workmen's houses contained some items related to Bes probably used for the family cult (DASEN, 1993, p. 80). Images of Bes<sup>5</sup> were also found in palaces, apparently, as protective deities. As a popular apposition, he seems to have settled down in some temples together with other deities.<sup>6</sup> Probably in Greek-Roman times, Bes had some kind of sanctuary dedicated to him in the oasis of Bahariya, as well as in the enclosure found by Quirbell in Saqqara (VELAZQUEZ BRIEVA, 2001, p. 88). He was also consulted in oracles, such as those located in the adjacent rooms of the Temple of Abydos (SPURR, REEVES AND QUIRKE, 2001, p. 61; PINCH, 1994, p. 164; POSENER, 1959, p. 197; BONNET, 1952, p. 108; VELAZQUEZ BRIEVA, 2001, p. 88).

Amulets of Bes, as those in the shape of the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, whom Bes aided as she attended women during the delivery, were particularly worn in everyday life, especially by women and children; but these amulets also served a protective purpose in the tomb, as they ensured a successful regeneration.

Bes has generated an abundant and fruitful literature. He has been approached in a general way and a lot has been written about his origin, denomination, religious concepts, iconography, functions, etc. The objective of our work is not to add more data on the aspects already studied by numerous scholars but to make known the figures of Bes found at Tell el-Ghaba and their role in the site.

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<sup>3</sup> An aspect of the concept of the physical needs of gods was the offering of phallic votive gifts which, eventually, were to benefit the supplicant himself.

<sup>4</sup> Bes is often present at places where physical love is celebrated. Bes chambers seem to have been used either as shelters for lady inmates and their clients or as places of worship for those seeking reassurance as to their ability to procreate.

<sup>5</sup> There were paintings of Bes on the walls of the king's rooms in the palace of Amehotep III in Malkata and he appears in faience badges in the palace of Ramses II in Qantir.

<sup>6</sup> He appears, for instance, in the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir the-Bahari, in that of Amehotep III in Luxor and in the temple of Mut in Karnak. He also appears in connection with god Hathor in the temples and mentioned mammisis.

## Bes god at Tell el-Ghaba

Tell el-Ghaba was a frontier settlement strategically located next to the Pelusiac branch of the Nile and on the route that linked Egypt with Palestine, the so called Ways of Horus. It is located between Tell Hebwa I<sup>7</sup> to the West and Tell Qedwa, distant 5 km away to the east of Tell el-Ghaba, where a buttressed fortress was erected during the Saite period.<sup>8</sup> In a site like Tell el-Ghaba, with no meaningful epigraphic inscriptions, pottery becomes an important chronological indicator. According to studies carried out of its ceramic repertoire, the site was dated to the Third Intermediate-Early Saite Period.

Excavations carried out at Tell el-Ghaba, in Areas I, II and VI, uncovered superimposed architectural remains, such as modest domestic structures, residential and public mud brick buildings and industrial workshops that revealed successive occupational levels. The dark and charcoal rich sediment with oxidation lenses that formed a thick layer over underlying strata in all the excavated areas indicates that the site ended in a violent conflagration.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Abd el-Maksoud 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Redford 1998: 45-60. Excavations at Tell el-Qedwa or site T-21 in Oren's survey were resumed by D. Redford in the '90s.

<sup>9</sup> Excavations were directed by Eduardo Crivelli. Connections between levels of different areas have not been determined. A brief summary of the structures and their locations is as follows. Area I: Level I, first occupation by fishermen, remains of flimsy structures; Level II: Building A and Structure G; Level III: washing out remains of former occupation, the area is abandoned; Level IV: Building B, two phases of use; Level V: industrial workshops; Level VI: deep trenches, probably remains of flimsy structures, filled with a thick charcoal rich sediment indicative of destruction by fire (conflagration layer). Area II, West section: Level I, sondages attested foundation trenches of flimsy structures; Level II: Building C and an industrial oven; Level III: decay of Building C, conflagration layer. Area II, East section: Level I, Structure M; Level II: Building L; Level III: decay of Building L and open air activities; Level IV: Building D; Level V: conflagration layer. Area VI: Level I, remains of flimsy structures; Level II: Building F; Level III: conflagration layer (CRIVELLI MONTERO 2005: 50-51, 53-54, 84-86, 130-31, 144, 203-04, 221-03, 275-76, 279-80, 281-83, 303-04, 345-46, 358-59, 362).

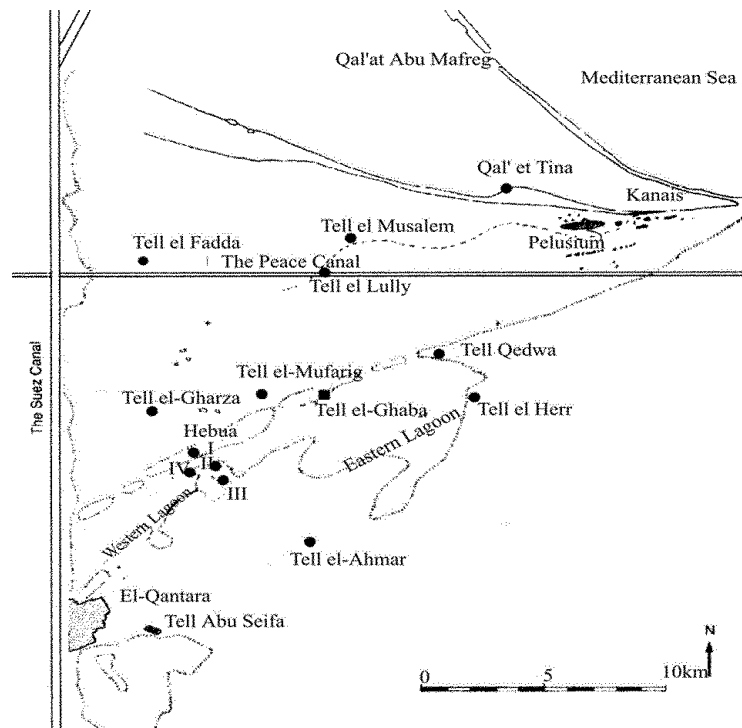


Figure 1. Location Map of Tell el-Ghaba, in the Eastern Delta. To the right, Tell el-Ghaba and nearby archaeological sites (modified from Valbelle et al 1992: fig. 1)

Several Bes figurines have been found at Tell el-Ghaba, almost all of them in the final destruction layer in Area I, except for F0009 (Area I, Level IV, Building B) and F0258 (Area II). We present here an annotated catalogue of these figurines.

**F0009, Area I, Level IV, Building B, L0017.**

*Description:* it represents god Bes with the four feather crown standing on a rectangular platform; the arms along the body (the right one is broken). No facial features can be distinguished because the piece is much eroded. It was found together with a gold bead, a faience compound bead made of several small beads, a loom weight and a sharpener.

*Dimensions:* 0.95 x 2.35 x 0.75 cm.

*Munsell colour:* 5GY 7/1 light greenish grey. *Material:* faience

*Publication:* FUSCALDO, 2005: 98, pl. 8.

*Comparanda:* HERRMANN, 1994: 359, pl. 29, fig. 407, from Megiddo, Iron Age IIB-C.



Figure 2. F0009

F0004, Area I, Level VI, L0001, final destruction layer.

*Description:* it shows Bes with the feather crown and it has a hole at the back under his nape. This find is much eroded.

*Dimensions:* 2.35 x 0.95 x 0.75 cm.

*Munsell colour:* Chart 1 for gley 8N (white). *Material:* faience.

*Publication:* FUSCALDO, 2005: 191, fig. 40:35, no. 419.

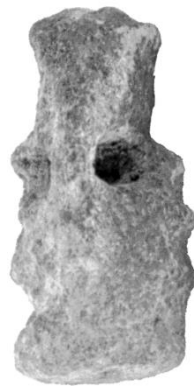


Figure 3. F0004

F0158, Area I, Level VI, L0001, final destruction layer.

*Description:* it is a double-faced Bes. This kind of amulet appears more frequently during the Third Intermediate Period. The god is represented on both sides of the figurine, standing on a rectangular platform, with his arched arms resting on his stomach. The head-dress is lacking, both faces show a trapezoidal beard that would suggest the leonine ventral mane, covered with horizontal lines (representation of the ribs?) that mix with the torso and abdomen, where the navel is marked. His body is thick and his position is crouched down.



His face is big, the cavities of the eyes are represented by incised lines, standing out the bulky eyebrows, the nose is wide and snub with deep nasal holes, his cheeks are rounded; the ears are sharp-pointed. On one side, part of the face is broken. Bes appears naked, and we do not know if he had a feather crown because the upper part of the object is broken. The find does not accentuate the curves, but rather it follows the canon of the figures of the Third Intermediate Period, showing the use of lines and angles.

*Dimensions:* 1.7 x 1.2 x 0.4 cm.

*Munsell colour:* 10Y 8/1 (light greenish grey). *Material:* faience.

*Publication:* FUSCALDO, 2005: 191, pl. 15, fig. 40:35, no. 420.

*Comparanda:* HERRMANN, 1994: 364-365, pl. 30, figs 414 (Tell Jemmeh, Iron Age IIB), 416 (Tell en-Nashbe, Iron Age IIB).



Figure 4. F0158.

F0515A, Area I, Level VI, L0001, destruction layer.

*Description:* only the upper part of the figurine is preserved: the head with the lower part of the feather crown and the shoulders. The feather crown seems to appear directly from the head and it is flared, with the feathers curved toward outside. The face of the god can not be observed due to its deterioration, but a rounded beard can be seen. The ears are also rounded, and in general, the treatment of the figure accentuates the curves, with a naturalistic treatment of the shoulders. It seems that it had a dorsal pillar. The find is eroded.

*Dimensions:* 1.4 x 2.4 x 1.2 cm.

*Munsell colour:* 5YR 4/1 (dark grey). *Material:* faience.

*Publication:* FUSCALDO, 2005: 191, pl. 16, fig. 40:35, no. 421.

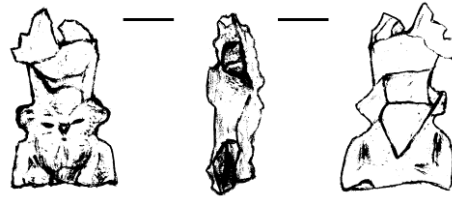


Figure 5. F0515

F0021, Area I, Level VI, L0008.

*Description:* it is a fragmentary statuette. The god has no feather crown preserved, the right ear and shoulder are lacking and the left ear is pierced. The beard is only delineated, the mouth is open, the eyes are marked by incised lines and the brows are thick and bulky. The head is covered with a net. It samples some typical iconographic characteristics of the Saite period: big and wide face, with rounded cheeks, except for the beard that does not finish in ripples. It is traced horizontally on his chest, formed by right lines, a feature more characteristic of the previous period. The nose is wide and snub and with deep nasal holes. The mouth is small and it is open, but it shows neither his tongue nor his teeth; the upper lip is fine and the lower one has a U-shape. He has a moustache that appears from under the nose and it is represented by two oblique lines. These features are characteristic of the Third Intermediate Period as well as of the Late Period. A feature of some Bes exemplars dated in the Third Intermediate Period, which is present in this find is the hair that is decorated with incised rhomboidal drawings forming a kind of net that covers his head. Another characteristic present in this find, and that has not disappeared completely from the Middle Kingdom, is the so called “widow’s pick”, i.e. the hair that finishes in a pick in the centre of the forehead. The face of the god has lost his leonine features, but he is not completely human; it is a mask-like face, and it is not aesthetic, stressing his apotropaic aspect.

*Dimensions:* 6.4 x 8.7 x 5.65 cm.

*Colour:* brown. *Material:* limestone.

*Comparanda:* similar to an exemplar of Musée d’art moderne (Strasbourg, Bas-Rhin), Antiquités Égyptiennes; Exposition à l’Ancienne Douane: 12 Julliet-15 Octobre 1973, catalogue 172, no. 58, dated to the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty.



Figure 6. F0021

F0258, Area II West, Level III, L1058.

*Description:* it represents a face or perhaps a mask. It is a double Bes, being the figure represented similarly on both faces, showing typical characteristics of the Third Intermediate Period: abundance of lines to represent his features such as the forehead, the brows, and the cavities of the eyes that are depicted by curved lines. The ears are round, small and of a feline type. The hair shows a “widow's pick” on the forehead. The big and snub nose is sketched; there are two incised right lines on each cheek. The figure has no mouth, beard or feather crown. It has four longitudinal holes on each end of the upper and lower parts.

*Dimensions:* 3.4 x 3.4 x 1.0 cm.

*Munsell colour:* 2.5Y 8/3 (pale yellow). Material: faience.

*Publication:* FUSCALDO, 2005: 311, pl. 6, no. 76.

*Comparanda:* HERRMANN, 2003: 125, pl. XC, no. 650; it is similar but bigger than Tell el-Ghaba's exemplar.



Figure 7. F0158

F0230, Area I.

*Description:* the find is fragmented and eroded. It shows a stylized torso and the upper part of the legs. The arms and legs are arched. The hands lean on the bulky hips. The navel is marked.

At the back, the hair ends up in a triangle shape.

*Dimensions:* 2.3 x 1.6 x 0.9 cm.

*Munsell colour:* 5YR 7/4 (pink). *Material:* faience.



Figure 8. F0230

F0034, Area I, Level VI, L0001, final destruction layer.

*Description:* it is very rudimentary and much worn away but with a complete body; the legs are bowed and part of the right leg is lacking. The figure does not show the feather crown, but it is so damaged that it is not possible to affirm whether it had one. The forms of the object are rounded.

*Dimensions:* 2.5 x 4.2 x 1.4 cm. *Material:* bronze

*Publication:* FUSCALDO, 2005: 191, pl. 17, fig. 40:35, no. 422.

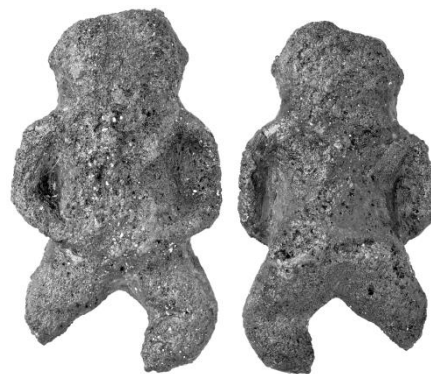


Figure 9. F0034

## Conclusions

Preliminary comparative observations on the Bes exemplars retrieved from Tell el-Ghaba indicate/show considerable variation among themselves.

F0004 and F0009, although badly eroded, can be assimilated in their shape; but the dorsal pillar, the base and what seems to be the breasts of the god of F0009 are features lacking in F0004.

All the remaining objects are different from each other. Some of them have characteristics typical of the Third Intermediate Period (F0158, F0258), some others of the Saite Period (F0034, F0515, F0004, F0009) and others have a mix of both periods (F0021). Another characteristic is that our Bes objects do not appear with such attributes as snakes, musical instruments or knives. F0034 alone could be in a dance posture, although due to its deterioration, we cannot affirm it.

On account of the characteristics of the Bes objects found at Tell the-Ghaba, we may conclude that they were used as amulets by its population and that they all shared the apotropaic character and function. In Building B they were worshipped in domestic shrines as household protectors fighting off evil spirits, aiding women in labour and watching over mothers, children, and childbirth.

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