

### 3.28 Decorated spoon with Bes

Faïence, two-tone colour.

Late Period (c. 715 – 332 BC).

H. 6.7 cm, W. 3.8 cm, D. 7 mm.

In Ancient Egypt ordinary mortals had no access to the great state temples, where a never-ending daily cycle of rituals was performed by professional priests who had been initiated in the religious secrets and who acted on behalf of the divine king. The great gods of Egypt who received a cult in these temples could also be worshipped by ordinary people in their homes and local shrines, but in addition to these “official” gods there were many minor deities or household deities who were considered to have protective and healing powers. Among these the dwarf god Bes, or Aha, “the fighter”, as he was also called, was particularly popular.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the part human, part animal figure which we call Bes represented a whole series of benevolent beings who functioned as protectors of the family, especially during the night. Bes was particularly concerned with sexuality and childbirth, and his image appears on numerous objects and depictions associated with the bedroom and the birth chamber. These aspects also extended to the world of the hereafter, where sexuality and procreation served the perpetual regeneration of the deceased. Bes also protected the sun god who was reborn from the underworld every morning. In the Late Period he was also worshipped in the official state temples, notably in the so-called *mammisi* or “birth-house” of the temple. The object discussed here belongs to a group of what is usually called “cosmetic spoons”. This name suggests that they were used as containers for ointments or perfumes and it is usually assumed that they were primarily for domestic use. The function of these objects is in fact far from clear, however. Most excavated examples come from tombs and some have also been found in temple sites, suggesting a ritual significance. This interpretation is corroborated by the religious motifs often found in the decoration of these spoons. On the other hand, a few examples have also been found in houses and town sites, perhaps implying a domestic use.<sup>2</sup>

The decoration of the present spoon is dominated by a figure of Bes. The god is standing face on in a threatening pose; the emaciated torso and legs add to his frightening appearance, but unlike many other representations of Bes, this one is not sticking out his tongue. The beard appears to be human, but the ears are those of a lion and he also sports an animal tail. On his head he

wears his usual feather crown. The deity is holding the stem of a budding lotus in each hand. On either side is a longer stem with a large open lotus flower and a *was*-sceptre with its characteristic animal head. This hieroglyphic sign means “power” or “dominion”; a pair of *was*-sceptres also frequently function as supports of heaven. Both elements are present in the symbolism of this spoon: on the one hand the *was*-sceptre stresses the protective power of Bes, on the other it supports the shallow round dish of the spoon which takes the form of the hieroglyph *shen* representing the circuit of the sun, the universe, and eternity. The base of the scene is formed by a rippled line which represents the primeval waters from which the world emerged at the beginning of creation. The symbolism of the decoration thus emphasizes creation and regeneration, which may support the idea that we are here dealing with a funerary item rather than an object of domestic use.

The colour of the little faïence spoon ranges from grey-blue to light green. In various places there is a brown discoloration. There is also minor iridescence. The basic shape of the object was probably achieved by putting faïence paste into a mould. During the firing process, the front and back acquired a different colour and sheen. It also seems to have warped a little, the back being very slightly concave. A small piece in the left lower corner has been broken off and repaired.

Most decorated spoons are made of bone, wood or various types of stone. Examples in faïence are comparatively rare and do not appear until after the New Kingdom. The present example also dates from the Late Period, but it is difficult to be more precise.

JvD

<sup>1</sup> H. Altenmüller, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* I (Wiesbaden 1975), 720–723 and M. Malaise, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* I (New York 2001), 179–181.

<sup>2</sup> I. Wallert, *Der verzierte Löffel: seine Formgeschichte und Verwendung im Alten Ägypten* (Wiesbaden 1967); R.E. Freed, in *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558–1085 BC* (Boston 1982), 207.

