

# THE DWARF GOD GUARDIAN OF THE MOTHER AND HER CHILD



Even as a fragment, this statuette of red-brown compact terracotta shows the flourishing iconography of the **dwarf god Bes**, heir of the warlike Aha on the magic ivories of the Middle Kingdom, “fighting” in guard of the mother and her child.



## Power to avert evil influences

Standing and brandishing a long sword in his raised right arm, his left arm, now lost, would also have held some object. His leonine genie face shows all the **apotropaic characteristics**: a large face mask, a short, flat nose, globular eyes with a marked iris, eyebrows in a V on a lined brow, tongue no doubt visible, wavy beard with curly tips (mane transposed) and small round ears revealing his underlying feline nature.





## Bes crowned by a naos with an Apis bull

On the modius (the circular base of the crown) crossed by the blade, the curved headdress of six stylized feathers carries the marching Apis bull, sculpted in strong relief, the head in profile crowned by the globe between his horns, the muzzle close to a small flared stand, perhaps with a rounded offering.

The plastic quality of this fragment sculpted in high relief is remarkable, with a mellow plasticity and a refinement in the details which indicate the quality of the **best terracotta workshops** in the Delta.

## Diversified pantheon of Bes figurines

In the overflowing corpus of terracotta figurines rich of a diversified “pantheon” of Bes figures, the main typologies become evident. One insists the “**child**” **component** inherent in the

Guardian protecting the maternal sphere, with an entirely nude Bes brandishing his sword and controlling in his left fist the head of a muscular snake that winds round his forearm.

The other, in much the same attitude, equips Bes with a Macedonian tailored breastplate over his tunic, in the manner of other armed gods like **Horus** or **Anubis**, and strengthens his left arm either with the enrolled ophidian, or with a shield, sometimes with an ombos, perhaps as a symbol of the vanquished power of the Galatians.



## Intermingling of Greek and Egyptian cultures

This **association with Apis** is a witness of the intermingling Egyptian and Greek cultures during the Ptolemaic Period. In the Serapeum of Saqqara, the cult building termed the “room of Bes” contained a carved image of the Apis bull, whereas the burial celebrations of the sacred bovine required ritual dances carried out by dwarves, participating priests recalling the redoubtable divinities of small size and terrible magical power.

## Popular religion for the common mortal

Through the prisms of the *interpretatio aegyptiaca* or *graeca* respectively, one tries to disengage the visual thematic underlying the iconography of Bes and his teeming terracotta figures from any Greco-Egyptian “intermingling”. At the time, the **cosmopolitan population** could be inclined to relate the muscular dwarf,

alter ego of the Egyptian “Child on crocodiles”, to the **Heracles-Harpocrates** enthralling the snakes from his cradle, who proposed a satisfactory “Greekish” version.

In that imagery, the “Bes with the Apis” seems to be popular in sectors near the Serapeia of Egypt, and this current fragment suggests that Thonis might have owned such a structure, like Canopus or Alexandria.

Filled with the wish for magic, the vast production would reflect a “popular” **religion more easily accessible** to the common mortal than the highly theological one of the great temples, even if both of them grew out of the same fertile soil.

**Object:** Ceramic (Nile silt, red-brown alluvial paste, pressed in a mould, high relief with a flat back). The upper part is preserved above a diagonal fracture (crown, face and arm). Height 25 cm, thickness 5 cm. Heracleion (south of the temenos containing temples of Amun and Khonsu), third – second century BC. Maritime Museum, Alexandria (SCA 1586)

**Source:** Original description by Jocelyne Berlandini-Keller in exhibition catalogue „Osiris. Egypt’s Sunken Mysteries“, p 88, Paris, 2015, re-ed 2018, exh. Egypt’s Sunken Cities, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 4 November 2018 - 14 April 2019

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