

# Bes Vases from Palestine and Syria

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IN the 1973 and 1974 seasons of excavations conducted by the writer at Tel Mevorakh in the Sharon Plain, three strata of the Persian period were uncovered, all dating from the later part of the period, that is from the late fifth to the early fourth centuries B.C.<sup>1</sup> During the dismantling of an earthen bank some sherds of a pottery vessel were found between the middle and the lower Persian strata. After repair, the sherds were seen to form part of the body of a jug (Pl. 32:A)<sup>2</sup> made of a local pinkish-brown clay, on which the distinctive features of the monkey-like face of Bes are well preserved. A flattened nose, close-set eyes, eyebrows and ears are moulded on the exterior, and feathers are scratched on the forehead. The mouth is lacking, but under the nose a somewhat complicated design apparently represents the beard and moustache.

In the search for analogies to this find, it became clear that the jug from Tel Mevorakh is one of a small group of vessels found in Palestine and Syria, most of which are not adequately published and some not published at all. The intention of this note is to summarize the material from Palestine and Syria and to discuss its date, typology, place of origin and meaning.

In addition to the Tel Mevorakh jug some eight Bes vases have been found in excavations in Palestine, two at Samaria and six at Tell Jemmeh; an additional vessel was found accidentally in the region of Samaria (Pl. 33:A).<sup>3</sup> One is known from Syria.

The two vessels from Samaria were discovered in the Harvard excavations.<sup>4</sup> Only one of them is published; it is described in the report as a 'bulging jar with Bes head moulded on one side'. It is made of a local red ware and is almost completely preserved except for its neck. The face is moulded rather schematically; the eyes, eyebrows and nose project and the mouth is lacking. An interesting addition is the pierced eyeballs. The feathers are indicated by a triangle in the middle of the forehead. Neither of the Samaria jugs was discovered in a clear stratigraphic context, but both were correctly included in the 'Babylonio-Grecian' pottery, a term used in this

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<sup>1</sup> See *IEJ* 23 (1973), pp. 256–257, and 24 (1974), pp. 266–268.

<sup>2</sup> Registration No. 484, locus 125.

<sup>3</sup> The vessel was purchased from an antiquities dealer in Jerusalem and is now in the collection of Carmen and Louis Warschaw, Los Angeles, with whose kind permission it is published here.

<sup>4</sup> G.A. Reisner, C.S. Fisher and D.G. Lyon: *Harvard Excavations at Samaria 1908–1910*, Cambridge, Mass., 1924, Vol. I, p. 288, Fig. 163:III2; Vol. II, Pl. 67:e (Reg. No. 1851). The number of the unpublished vessel is 2194.

report for the Persian period. The date was apparently established with reference to Egyptian prototypes ('Similar vases are found in Egypt from later periods.')

Of the six vessels found at Tell Jemmeh, four are shown in Petrie's excavation report but on such a small scale that it is difficult to recognize them (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Our Pls. 32: C, F; 33: B show three of the published vessels,<sup>6</sup> and Pl. 32: B, E the two previously unpublished.<sup>7</sup> Unlike those from Samaria, all the Bes vases from Tell Jemmeh were discovered in a good stratigraphic context in stratum A-B, dated by Petrie to the eighth-mid-sixth centuries B.C.,<sup>8</sup> but now generally assigned to the first part of the Persian period (late sixth-mid-fifth centuries).<sup>9</sup>

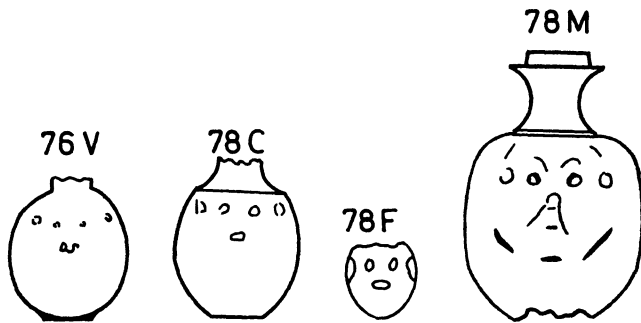


Fig. 1. Four Bes vases from Tell Jemmeh.

The Persian period date for the Bes vases from Palestine is supported by the one example from Syria known to us, discovered in a tomb at Deve Hüyük in northern Syria, not far from Carchemish, by Woolley, who dated it to the Persian period and described it as 'an imitation of the late Egyptian Bes vases'.<sup>10</sup> In a recent discussion

<sup>5</sup> W.F. Petrie: *Gerar*, London, 1928, Pl. LIX:76V, 78C, 78F and 78M. Three of them were republished by J.G. Duncan: *Corpus of Dated Palestinian Pottery*, London, 1930, Pl. 78c, f, m. The author wishes to thank Dr. A. Kempinski for drawing his attention to these vessels.

<sup>6</sup> The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to the Rev. John R. Matthers, who located these vessels now in the collection of the Institute of Archaeology of the University of London, examined them and supplied the author with photographs. Mr. Matthers also discovered the two unpublished specimens.

<sup>7</sup> The photographs of the Jemmeh vessels are published here with the kind permission of Prof. P.J. Parr and the Institute of Archaeology of the University of London. They are numbered there as follows: 78C—E XXXVI 25/15; 78F—E XXXVI 25/16; 78M—E XXXVI 25/13; unpublished fragment (here Pl. 32: B)—E XXXVI 25/14; unpublished fragment (here Pl. 32: E)—E XXXVI 26/8.

<sup>8</sup> Petrie, *op. cit.* (above, n. 5), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. K. Galling: *Archäologischer Jahresbericht*, ZDPV 52 (1929), p. 245; G.E. Wright: *Iron: The Date of its Introduction into Common Use in Palestine*, AJA 43 (1939), p. 460, n. 4; L.A. Sinclair: *An Archaeological Study of Gibeah (Tell el-Fül)*, AASOR 34-35 (1954-1956), p. 42, n. 34; E. Stern: *The Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period (538-332 B.C.E.)*, Jerusalem, 1973, pp. 27-29 (Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> C. L. Woolley: *A North Syrian Cemetery of the Persian Period*, *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 7 (1914-1916), pp. 115-129 (esp. p. 126), Pl. XXVII:7.

Moorey dated the Deve Hüyük tombs more precisely to the end of the fifth century B.C. and identified them as tombs of Iranian soldiers.<sup>11</sup>

The Persian period date for the Bes vases from Syria and Palestine is further supported by their typology. Of the eleven vessels discussed here ten are jugs and one (Jemmeh No. 78<sup>F</sup>; Pl. 32:F) is a juglet. All the jugs belong to the 'water decanter' type and can be divided into two groups.

The vessels of the first group—the earlier, probably dating from the first half of the Persian period—closely resemble the Phoenician and Israelite decanters of the Late Iron Age. The Samaria jug, Jemmeh No. 78<sup>C</sup> (Pl. 32:C) and the Deve Hüyük vessel clearly belong to this group. They have a low ring base, a piriform body and a distinctive angular shoulder. The complete vessel from Deve Hüyük suggests that they had a handle from the ridge at the neck to the shoulder.

The second group consists of decanters with a rounded, globular body and sloping shoulders. The ridge at the neck, typical of the first group, has either disappeared or descended to the base of the neck. These features are commonly found in vessels of the late Persian period. The most complete vessel in this group is Jemmeh No. 78<sup>M</sup> (Pl. 33:B), and to it probably also belong the other two jugs from Tell Jemmeh and the jug from Tel Mevorakh (Pl. 32:A). The jug from the Samaria region (Pl. 33:A) belongs in this category.

As for the juglet (Jemmeh No. 78<sup>F</sup>; Pl. 32:F), it is of a type commonly found in the local repertoire of the late Persian period. Examples are known from En Gedi, Shiloh and Tell en-Naşbeh;<sup>12</sup> several as yet unpublished specimens have been found at Tel Mevorakh.

In looking for the origin of these vessels, it seems to us that attention should be paid to a distinctive feature, namely the double, deeply grooved rim splayed like a funnel. This can clearly be seen on Jemmeh No. 78<sup>M</sup> (Pl. 33:B) and on the jug from Deve Hüyük. This rim type is undoubtedly taken from the repertoire of the late Phoenician decanters (Iron Age IIC) as exemplified by those found at Achzib.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that the 'double rim' is also common in Palestinian decanters of the same period, but only in the northern part of the country, which was strongly influenced by Phoenician pottery traditions.<sup>14</sup>

However, there are also some differences between Phoenician and Israelite decanters of the Late Iron Age and our decanters from the Persian period, as for

<sup>11</sup> P.R.S. Moorey: Iranian Troops at Deve Hüyük in Syria in the Fifth Century, *Levant* 7 (1975), pp. 108–117.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Stern, *op. cit.* (above, n. 9), p. 126, Fig. 191; C.C. McCown: *Tell en-Naşbeh*, I, Berkeley, 1947, p. 226, Fig. 58:12; Marie Louise Buhl and S. Holm-Nielsen: *Shiloh, The Pre-Hellenistic Remains*, Copenhagen, 1969, Pl. XII:115.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Amiran: *Ancient Pottery of the Holy Land*, Jerusalem, 1969, Pl. 92:14; p. 273, photo 287.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Pl. 88:1–4; p. 259, photos 255–256.



Fig. 2. Three Bes vases from Dephene (Egypt).

example the complete lack of red slip and burnish in the later group, the differences in body shape mentioned above, and even in the details of the double rim itself; in the vessels of the Persian period the lower part protrudes (Pl. 33:B). We may therefore conclude that though our Bes vases are part of the local pottery tradition in the Persian period, they also bear the clear imprint of the earlier Phoenician ceramic ideas.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 3. Three Bes vases from Kafr Ammar, Meydum and Heliopolis (Egypt).

<sup>15</sup> We must of course mention here the larger group of Egyptian Bes vases (see our Figs. 2 and 3), which are frequently found in excavations. We have selected at random from excavation reports six specimens from Dephene, Meydum, Kafr Ammar and Heliopolis (cf. W.M.F. Petrie: *Tanis II*, London, 1888, pp. 64-65, Pl. XXXV: 64-66; idem *et al.*, *Meydum and Memphis III*, London, 1910, p. 37, Pl. XXVII:138; W.M.F. Petrie and E. Mackay: *Heliopolis, Kafr Ammar and Shunafa*, London, 1915, p. 7, Pls. XI:48, XXXIII:47; W.M.F. Petrie: *Kahun Gurob and Haura*, London, 1890, Pl. XXV:27). Two other examples of unknown provenance are now exhibited in the Department of

We now come to the question of the use of the Bes vases. In her comprehensive discussion of the iconography of Bes in the Levant, Veronica Wilson, following Hornblower, included our vase type in a group of Bes reliefs which portray the god suckling the child Horus, and suggested that the Egyptian Bes vases are offering vessels which contained milk.<sup>16</sup>

In our opinion the significance of the Bes vases in the Syro-Phoenician region was mainly apotropaic, as was that of the Bes figurines discovered at Ḥanita in western Galilee,<sup>17</sup> and of the grotesque Phoenician masks and pendants.<sup>18</sup> Support is given to our assumption by the peculiar concentric circle incised on the forehead on the Deve Hüyük vessel,<sup>19</sup> a sign which is usually interpreted<sup>20</sup> as a good luck symbol.<sup>21</sup>

Egyptian Antiquities of the British Museum; one (No. 5097) was acquired in 1834 and the other (No. 5096) in 1839, both from the Anastasi collection. It is quite clear that these Egyptian specimens belong to a completely different vase type, with a pointed base, short neck and wide mouth, i.e. a regular Egyptian type. Others have flat bases and, in addition to the face, the hands are also depicted. At all the above-mentioned sites they were attributed to the 25th and 26th dynasties or later; it was concluded that they occurred earlier in Egypt than in Syria-Palestine, and served as prototypes for the later examples.

<sup>16</sup> Veronica Wilson: *The Iconography of Bes in Cyprus and the Levant*, *Levant* 7 (1975), pp. 77–103, esp. p. 81; G.D. Hornblower: *Funerary Designs on Predynastic Jars*, *JEA* 16 (1930), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> J. Jeda'ia (ed.): *Publications of the Museum of Ḥanita* 1 (1963), pp. 35–39 (Hebrew).

<sup>18</sup> E. Stern: *Phoenician Masks and Pendants*, *PEQ* 108 (1976), pp. 109–118, Pls. IX–XI.

<sup>19</sup> Woolley, *op. cit.* (above, n. 10), Pl. XXVII:7.

<sup>20</sup> Stern, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 18); W. Culican: *Phoenician Demons*, *JNES* 93 (1976), pp. 21–24.

<sup>21</sup> When this paper was in press, it came to the author's attention that an additional Bes vase (Pl. 32:D), believed to originate at a site in the southern part of Palestine, is in the collection of M. Dayan. This vessel differs from the others presented here in that it is a cup. The fabric is dark red. In addition to the usual features, the mouth and tongue are shown, and the arms are represented by incisions running from the ears. These two details are commonly found on Egyptian vessels, and it is very possible that this is an Egyptian import, or a close imitation. In any case, it seems to date from the seventh or sixth century B.C. The author wishes to express his thanks to Mr. Dayan for permission to publish this vessel.

**PLATE 32**



**A:** Fragment of Bes vase from Tel Mevorakh.



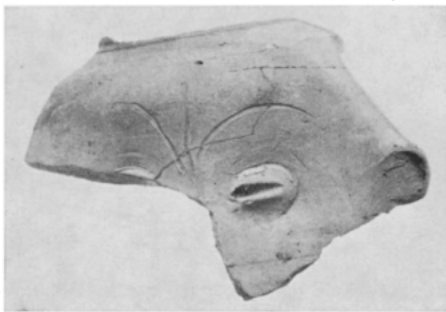
**B:** Fragment of Bes vase from Tell Jemmeh, E XXXVI 25/14.



**C:** Jemmeh No. 78C.



**D:** Bes vase, collection of M. Dayan.



**E:** Fragment of Bes vase from Tell Jemmeh, E XXXVI 26/8.



**F:** Juglet, Jemmeh No. 78F.



A: Bes vase from the Samaria region, collection of Carmen and Louis Warsaw.



B: Jemmeh No. 78M.

BES VASES FROM PALESTINE AND SYRIA



C: The seal impression.

ANOTHER SLAYING OF TIAMAT?



D: The bulla, three times actual size.