3.28 Decorated spoon with Bes

Faience, 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. 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. 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 faience 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 faience 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 faience 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

3.29 Pataikos cippus amulet

Faience.
Late Period, Dynasty 26, 664 – 525 BC.
H. 7.6 cm, W. 3.8 cm, D. 2.7 cm.

With his usual iconography, Pataikos is depicted as a naked dwarf wearing a skullcap, in this instance surmounted by a scarab. His eyes are heavy-lidded and his nose broad. His face is particularly long and his chin pointed; even his lips have the appearance of a chevron. His arms are bent at the elbows and each clenched fist holds a high relief but indistinct object which lies over his upper arm and shoulder at each side. On analogy with other examples the objects are most likely to be a rare depiction, in this context, of a pair of cobras with puffed-up hoods and long tails. A falcon facing forward perches on each shoulder.

Pataikos stands with each foot planted firmly on the head of a crocodile, the two turning their heads so as to be depicted snout to snout; at the back the tips of their tails touch. The reptiles themselves are set on a plinth. At either side, standing on a crocodile’s rump and facing outwards, is the smaller figure of a goddess in high relief. Each stands with hands down by the thighs and feet together, wearing a long figure-hugging dress and a tripartite wig. The headdress of the goddess to the viewer’s left identifies her as Nephthys since it comprises the two hieroglyphs which spell her name. That makes the identity of the other goddess as her sister Isis quite certain too, through association, even though the sun disc between the horns on her head could also be worn by Hathor.

The back of the amulet is a slab with a slightly rounded top which is joined to the back of the head of Pataikos by a striated vertical loop for suspension. The whole back surface is filled by the lightly incised figure of a goddess facing right, wearing horns and sun disc on top of her tripartite wig. This represents either Isis again or Hathor. Her winged arms are held out to grasp at each side a stem ending in a large pendant bud-like shape. Nevertheless, on analogy with other examples these objects must be intended to be ostrich feathers. Apart from one of the falcons being partially broken away, the amulet is in a very good state of preservation. However, the lustrous blue-green glaze is rather patchy with minor iridescence all over the surface. In some places it is discoloured to a greyish-brown. There is also a dark brown encrustation, especially in some of the lower areas.