

# Golden Mummies of Egypt

## Audio guide

### 2. Terracotta of Bes

00:00:00 Dr Campbell Price

Measuring around 35 centimetres tall, this is a terracotta figurine of the Egyptian god, Bes. He is a ferocious looking dwarf, with exaggerated features and lion-like facial hair. He wears A headdress with five tall plumes and is dressed in Macedonian-style armour, made up of a tunic and a kilt. He is wielding a small sword, or a dagger, above his head in his right hand, and with his left he holds an oval shield. There are traces of a white plaster wash on the surface of the figurine.

00:00:37 Greg Jenner

So, Bes, he's a really distinctive Egyptian god, isn't he? Because he goes all the way back to the old, old days of, you know, the New Kingdom, you know, 2000 years before your exhibition. So, he's hung on for quite a while.

00:00:51 Campbell

He has.

00:00:52 Greg

A very distinctive look.

00:00:54 Campbell

He doesn't look like your regular Egyptian God, does he?

00:00:56 Greg

No.

00:00:57 Campbell

And I think that may actually be why he is so popular. Because as you know, Greg, conventionally you show figures, human figures...

00:01:07 Greg

Side on.

00:01:09 Campbell

Side on. He is shown in wall scenes, even, usually, as full frontal, facing forward. And I think that was to scare off other potentially harmful beings. So, he's made to be pretty... 'in your face'. He has got his tongue out. He's often shown naked with weapons. And this is...

00:01:38 Greg

Nothing scarier!

00:01:39 Campbell

No, nothing scarier than Bes on a dark night. But this is the Graeco-Roman Period interpretation of that.

00:01:49 Greg

Which is why he's wearing Macedonian armour. So, when we say Macedonian, that's Alexander the Great's army. Those are, we call them Greeks, but they're not really Greeks. They're Macedonian. But he comes and conquers Egypt in the, sort of, what, 330s BCE, something like that?

00:02:09 Campbell

Yep.

00:02:10 Greg

So, he's swept in from a different culture, and Bes is an Egyptian god, and yet Bes is now wearing a foreign suit of armour. He's wearing all the weapons, and all the stuff that one of Alexander's soldiers would wear. So, he's sort of, he's kind of role-playing as the invader.

00:02:27 Campbell

Yes, exactly. And I think as you already said, you know, over a thousand years before this figurine was carved, in what we call the New Kingdom, and even a bit earlier, there is a version of Bes called Aha in ancient Egyptian.

00:02:43 Greg

A-ha!

00:02:44 Campbell

Yes, a-ha. Or A-ha, as in the band. He is, if you're very old and remember, like us, the band A-ha from the 1980s.

00:02:54 Greg

Yes, we are old. Yeah. Look them up.

00:02:57 Campbell

But in the Middle Kingdom, so maybe 2,000 BC, Aha's name means 'the fighter'. And I think that's what Bes is always shown doing. And the thing that Bes is shown fighting, is your enemies. So, if you're worried about, I don't know, you're a lady who's pregnant, or you're a very small child, you know, you're quite vulnerable. So, you would have Aha, or later, Bes, depicted on headrests that people would sleep on, on beds – Tutankhamun has a bed with Bes on – on bedroom walls. And in those scenes, the Egyptians of the time knew about knives and daggers, and that's what Bes is holding. As you say, this is probably an indication of when this figurine was carved, say like 300s BC, when the scariest thing you can imagine, if you're an Egyptian, is a Macedonian soldier in Alexander's army, bursting into your house. So, you take something scary and turn it towards defending yourself against unseen forces.

00:04:04 Greg

That's interesting. So, you think he's wearing Macedonian armour to scare off Macedonian soldiers. You don't think it's like... You don't think it's them saying, hey, the Macedonians are the good guys, they've come and freed us from the Persians, who are the bad guys, and we are team Macedonia. Here's Bes, our god wearing their stuff, wearing their kit?

00:04:26 Campbell

It could be that, Greg, but I suspect based on other sources, the Egyptians didn't like the Greeks much, the Ptolemies. So, you know, you know, history depends on who writes it. Some say Alexander was a liberator who freed Egypt from the Persians. Some say he was an invader who really just wanted to be an Egyptian pharaoh himself. So, I would rather suspect it's taking an image of something scary, and using that practically, to defend yourself against these unseen forces.

00:05:03 Greg

Yeah, no, that's that makes sense. I guess that what's interesting is that he, being a soldier, a warrior, there's a sort of martial military quality to him that makes him feel like he's on your side. But actually, he also represents the thing you're scared of most, right, which is enemy soldiers coming in and trashing your house and taking over your country.

00:05:22 Campbell

Yeah.

00:05:23 Greg

So, he's not here to scare off ghosties and demons and goblins and snakes. He's here to scare off people.

00:05:32 Campbell

Potentially. That is, yeah, potentially. I think he could be both. He's there to scare off the ghosties and the demons, but maybe you're also hoping to fight like with like, so yeah, if he's showing him Macedonian armour, then, Macedonian soldiers might still be a threat at this time.

00:05:50 Greg

Fair enough. He's 35 centimetres tall, so he's not big, is he? He's like, the size of a ruler. He's not, you know, he's not dominating the house, but I guess he's small but mighty. That's his thing.

00:06:01 Campbell

He's small but mighty and, as you say, very importantly, he's not set up in a temple. He's not set up in a tomb. He is set up in a house. And where these objects have been found – this piece came to Manchester through a private collection, so we're not absolutely sure of which archaeological site it was found at – but where they have been found, these have been set up in household altars. So, you have your house, you have the kind of equivalent of the living room, and you would have a little shrine, a little kind of cupboard for your images of gods, and that's where the family would pray.

00:06:35 Greg

And you said that it's terracotta, which is like a kind of clay. But you said there was a sort of white plaster wash on it. So, does that mean it was white originally, and that sort of washed off? Was it painted? Do we know?

00:06:50 Campbell

Yes, really good point actually, and this is a cool thing about these figures. You can see, although we can't see looking at it from the front, that at the back it's more obvious, that this piece was made in two parts in a mould. So, they were mass produced. You know, you'd go down the figurine shop and buy yourself these. They were made in two parts and then stuck together, and then, yeah, washed with plaster and then painted. Now, this is interesting. If you'd buried a painted figurine like that in a tomb in Egypt, in the desert, it probably would have preserved the colour. But most of these lack colour because they were set up in houses where, you know, it gets a bit sweaty. It gets a bit steamy, sometimes it gets a bit, you make the dinner and, you know, things splash about.

00:07:38 Greg

And sunlight pouring, you've got sunlight. It's, you know, this is Egypt, right? It's sunny. It's a sunny country. OK, so the paint, you think, is going to come off over time and not last. Whereas if this had been a tomb, chances are it might be blue and red and green and really lovely, beautiful colours.

00:07:56 Campbell

Yes, I think originally, they were made quite colourful when you bought them in the shop, but handling as well, just being exposed on a, you know, in a living room for 20 years, something is going to lose its colour.

00:08:10 Greg

OK, so maybe you rub him for good luck and, I don't know, maybe, yeah, maybe it all comes off. But yeah, he's small but mighty. You say terrifying. I think he's adorable, but you know.

00:08:20 Campbell

It depends on your taste.

00:08:22 Greg

Yeah, exactly. Maybe if you met him in a dark alleyway, you'd be scared and run away.