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# EGYPTIAN INFLUENCE ON THE PAINTED HUMAN FIGURES FROM KUNTILLET 'AJRUD

Gabriel Barkay and MiYoung Im

*In memory of Pirhiya Beck*

## Introduction

Kuntilet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman) is located along ancient roads in the eastern Sinai Peninsula, about 50 km. south of Kadesh-Barnea. Excavated by Z. Meshel, the site was identified as a religious centre from the late 9th or early 8th century BCE (Meshel 1978). However, others thought that the site was a desert road station (Hadley 1993:115–124) and suggested that the evidence, such as the absence of typical cult vessels, excludes the possibility that the site is of a religious nature. The finds, especially the inscriptions and the paintings, may corroborate the religious character of the site (Meshel 1979:34). The reading and translation of two of the pithoi inscriptions, done by Naveh (1979), are beyond the scope of this paper.

The two inscribed and painted pithoi were found in the “bench room” located at the entrance to the site. Although most of the Hebrew or Phoenician inscriptions are not well preserved, their contents are clearly religious. Scholars have given special attention to the title “Yahweh of Samaria with his consort, Asherah” inscribed on one of the pithoi. One particular drawing of Pithos A shows three figures that Dever (1984:21–37) suggested might fit this title, and the five painted figures on Pithos B were identified as worshippers of the three deity figures on Pithos A (Gilula 1978–79). However, according to Beck (1982:43), there were at least three different painters involved. The first painter drew mainly animal figures, while the second painter drew the Bes figure (A) and musician figure (C) on Pithos A. Another Bes figure (B) and five other figures (D-H) on Pithos B were drawn later by the third painter before the inscriptions were added (*ibid.*). Thus, Beck doubted the connection between the inscriptions and the painted figures.

Despite the careful analysis of the Kuntilet 'Ajrud paintings by Beck, it seems that some major questions have not yet been answered. In this article we will discuss the clothing of the human figures on the two painted pithoi. Our interpretations are based on the assumption that the painted figures show Egyptian clothing or features influenced by Egyptian civilization.

## Pithos A

Pithos A has paintings of animals: a horse, a boar, a cow and a calf, a tree and ibexes, and a lion (Beck 1982:2–68). In addition, there are three human figures (Fig. 1) interpreted as two standing males (A, B) and a seated female (C) on the right (Beck 1982; Dever 1984). Some scholars have identified Figure B as a female because it has nipples (Gilula 1978–79:129).

### Figures A and B

The features of Figures A and B are somewhat similar. They both are standing, facing front. They both have rectangular faces and appear to have square-cut beards (Beck 1982:28). Figure A is wearing a three-feathered headdress while Figure B has a “trapezoidal headdress, bisected by a horizontal line and sectioned by five vertical lines” (*ibid.*:29). Both figures have horizontal lines painted on their bodies. The lines of the upper part seem to represent the collarbones, although, “the line of the collarbone on the right figure

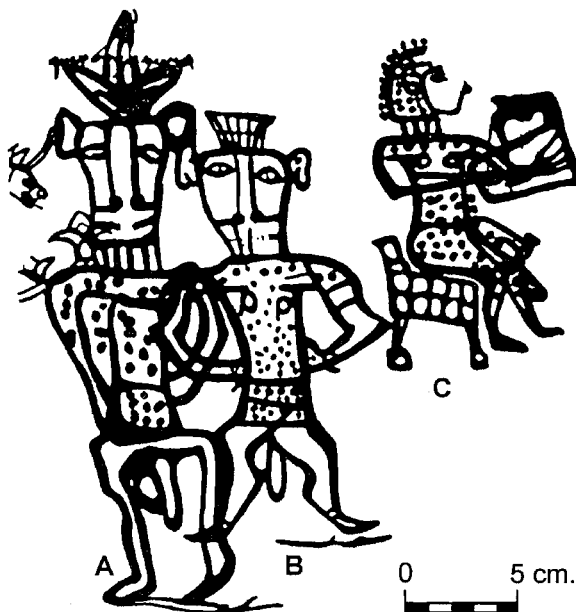


Fig. 1. Figures painted on Pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (after Beck 1982:9, Fig. 5).

is divided into two parts, each terminating in a P-shaped appendage to mark the breasts or nipples” (*ibid.*). The lines of the lower part, which form rectangles, seem to represent kilts. The most remarkable feature of these figures are the dots on their bodies and kilts as well as on their arms – on the left arm of Figure A and on the right upper arm of Figure B. The space between the body and the left arm of Figure A is also dotted. Another feature of Figure B is the parallel lines on its left arm, wrists, and ankles which may represent an armlet, bracelets, and anklets.

There is a consensus among scholars that both figures are depictions of the Egyptian god Bes with his typical features: arms akimbo, grotesque face, and feathered headdress (Hestrin 1991:56). According to Beck (1982:31), the nipples of Figure B do not necessarily indicate a female, as nipples appear on the chests of men and women alike on the Hubbard amphora from Cyprus.

She emphasized that both figures on the 'Ajrud pithos depict the god Bes.

Bes is an Egyptian dwarf god, whose figure has appeared in Egypt since the Middle Kingdom and became popular in the New Kingdom. He is described in the following words (Wilson 1975:78):

Bes is frontal and squatting. He is naked apart from the lion skin, whose tail is usually visible between his legs, and he often wears a feather crown. His hands rest on his thighs and his features are normally grotesque, animal rather than human. He is usually bearded and has mane-like hair.

Figures A and B have the features of Bes: the grotesque face, square beard, and a tail between their legs. The feathered headdress of Figure A is common to Bes figures while the headdress of Figure B is the particular crown of the faience Bes amulets in Phoenicia (Wilson 1975:88–90, Fig. 3.2). Although we have indicated the nudity of the Bes figures, clothed Bes figures have been found in New Kingdom Egypt (*ibid.*:78–80). Thus, the lines which seem to represent kilts on the two figures from Kuntillet 'Ajrud are not a hindrance in identifying them as representations of Bes. Moreover, Bes figures discovered on the Late Bronze Age Megiddo ivories are clothed, with short kilts and with long sashes (Loud 1939: Pls. 8, 24, 26).

The most interesting feature of the Bes figures from Kuntillet 'Ajrud is the dots on their bodies and kilts. Beck (1982:29, 33) refused to interpret the dots "as a garment pattern or even as indication of tattooing" and referred to the dots on painted potsherds from Timna as an example of an outlining technique. She felt that the dots were a later addition because the



Fig. 2. Dotted Bes figure wearing a kilt from Deir el-Medina (after Smith 1965: Fig. 57). Drawn by MiYoung Im.

overlapping inner arms are not dotted. However, in Egyptian art there are some examples of Bes figures with dots painted on their bodies. Three Bes figures from the armchair of Sitamun, daughter of Amenophis III (Davis 1907:40, Fig. 3), are shown wearing kilts (undotted), while their bodies are entirely covered with dots. Bes figures from Deir el-Medina, dating to the reign of Amenophis II, have dots on their bodies (Smith 1965: Fig. 57). A winged Bes figure (Fig. 2) has dots on his kilt and upper body – but only the upper chest and shoulders.

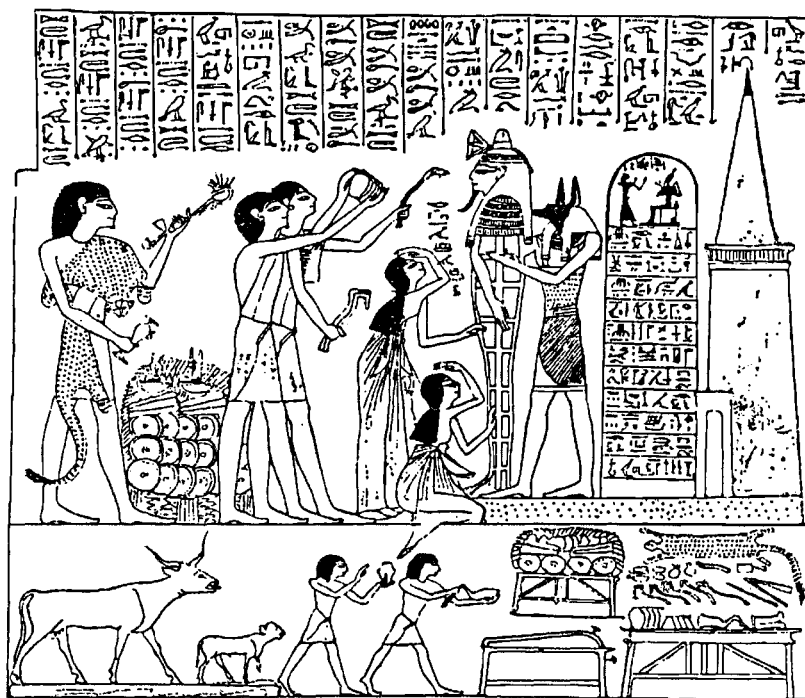


Fig. 3. Painted papyrus from Thebes in the 19th Dynasty. A priest, wearing a leopard skin, is performing a libation in the mummification rite. A leopard skin is visible amongst the burial offerings. (after Budge 1923:40).

Although we find instances of dots on some Bes figures, it does not help in understanding the meaning of the dots on the Kuntillet 'Ajrud Bes figures. However, we have discerned that the dots relate to the tail between the legs and they form a common characteristic of Bes representations in Egyptian art. Most scholars describe Bes as naked apart from a lion skin whose tail shows between his legs. According to Heuzey (1923:61), the skin worn by Bes was always a leopard's rather than a lion's skin, identifiable by the typical spots appearing on it. The wearing of a leopard skin seems to represent royalty in Egyptian art. Some Egyptian paintings from the 18th–19th Dynasties show people wearing leopard skins (Figs. 3–5), who are either princes or priests. It seems that they wore these leopard skins when they performed religious ceremonies or funerals. A wall painting from the tomb-chapel of Sobekhotep from Thebes, of the 18th Dynasty, shows a leopard skin as booty probably originating from Nubia (Fig. 6; Quirke and Spencer 1992:209, Fig. 160). A painted papyrus from Thebes dating to the 19th Dynasty reveals a leopard skin amongst the burial offerings (Fig. 3; Budge 1923:40).

In addition, a man is shown wearing a whole leopard skin with the leopard's head in front of his body. One of the leopard's front legs is tucked under the man's right arm, while the other front leg covers his left arm. The lower part of the leopard skin and one of its hind legs cover the man's kilt while the leopard's tail hangs down as depicted in Egyptian paintings.

The dots of the Bes figures from Kuntillet 'Ajrud may, therefore, represent the spots of leopard skins. The leopard skin covers the right upper arm of Figure A and the left upper arm of Figure B. Thus, the dots cover only one forearm of each figure and only the upper body and kilts exactly as in the parallels from the Egyptian wall paintings. Therefore we suggest that the dots, in the space between the right forearm and the body of Figure A, are meant to represent the spots of a leopard skin worn by that figure.



Fig. 4. Ramses II wearing a leopard skin (after Houston 1954:37, Fig. 41).

### Figure C

The chair on which Figure C is sitting has animal paw-shaped feet. "Its side panel and back seem to be covered with a scale design ... well known from the New Kingdom, e.g., on the chair of princess Sitamun or on Tut-ankh-Amun's golden throne" (Beck 1982:34–35). The figure is facing right and has a lyre in its hands. Its face is not entirely visible. Its hair is represented by dots and it has a smooth chin; the collarbone connects to the nipples. This figure is usually called the "lyre player" and is identified as a female (*ibid.*:31). As Beck emphasized, the nipples do not necessarily indicate the sex of the figure. She (*ibid.*) thought that the style of the hairdo, which reaches the chin-line, and the presence of a skirt, both covered with dots, suggest that it is a female.

Moreover, Dever (1984:21–37) thought that the lyre player should be identified with Asherah, the goddess, mentioned in the inscription.

Nevertheless, a skirt is a common costume of both sexes in the ancient Near East; it could be the long kilt of a man (Fig. 5). Also, the hair of the figure does not seem long enough to be a female's coiffure. In the ancient Near East, most of the females have long hair, as seen in many representations. Thus, Figure C could well have been a male.

The dots of the hairdo may represent a man's wig in the Egyptian style. Egyptians shaved their heads and wore wigs that "consisted of a construction of little curls arranged in horizontal rows lapping over each other like the tiles" (Erman 1894:218–219). The dots of the hairdo of Figure C may, thus, show the curls of a typical Egyptian-style wig. Further, the length of the hair is similar to that found in representations of Egyptian men's wigs. In addition, Figure C is shown clean-shaven like Egyptian men.

The most noticeable feature of Figure C is the dots that cover the body like those of the two Bes figures. Although it is not a representation of Bes, it also wears a leopard skin which, as mentioned, is a symbol of royalty in Egyptian art. The dots are shown on the figure's upper arm, its upper body, and both its legs. A line crossing the waist must be the representation of a kilt, although the kilt seems to be longer than those of the Bes figures. The edge line of the kilt must be the last dots on each side of its legs that appears below the knees in the middle of its shins. The two long appendages along its leg line are debatable. Beck proposed that these were belt lines that connect to a belt at the waist (Beck 1982:31). However, a careful look at these appendages shows differences between them. The upper appendage is thick on the leg and becomes thinner.



Fig. 5. A priest wearing a leopard skin (after Heuzey 1935: Pl. XVI).

At the end of this appendage, there are three dots connected very closely. This may be a representation of the hind leg of a leopard skin and the edge of the leg would be the leopard's claws. The lower appendage could well be a leopard's tail. Thus the seated musician figure is most probably a royal figure wearing a leopard skin following the Egyptian prototypes.

### Pithos B

This vessel has five painted figures (D-H) facing left with their forearms raised, standing in one line (Fig. 7). According to Beck "they were all drawn in the same rectilinear style. The arms are drawn like matchsticks, while the legs are depicted as two vertical lines crossed by two diagonals" (Beck 1982:36). Figures D, E, F, G are shown with hair while Figure H is clearly bald. Figure D, standing in front, has a stick or a staff in his hands. Figure E seems to show a male's sexual organ in the triangle between its legs (*ibid.*:38). The upper body of each figure is divided by horizontal and vertical lines. Figures E, F, and G have dots on their bodies while only F and G have dots on their legs. "If we assume that the dots represent the material of a garment, then there would be two different types of garments here. And since the dots also appear on the legs, it would mean that the garment was a long one and the legs showed through it: moreover there is no indication for any hem or border" (*ibid.*:40).

These five figures are usually identified as worshippers (*ibid.*:40–41). Beck compared these figures to painted figures on a cup from Timna showing two beardless men facing left with upraised arms (*ibid.*:39; Rothenberg 1972: Fig. 47.5). She also wrote that figures with their hair standing on end are known from other painted potsherds at Timna (Beck 1982:39). She explained that the outstretched arms can be an expression of adoration, supplication, or mourning, as exemplified on the 10th century BCE sarcophagus of Ahiiram from Byblos.



Fig. 6. Part of a wall painting from the tomb-chapel of Sobekhotep, ca. 1400 BCE, showing one of Nubians presenting a leopard skin to the Egyptian king. (after Quirke and Spencer 1992:209, Fig. 160). Drawn by MiYoung Im.



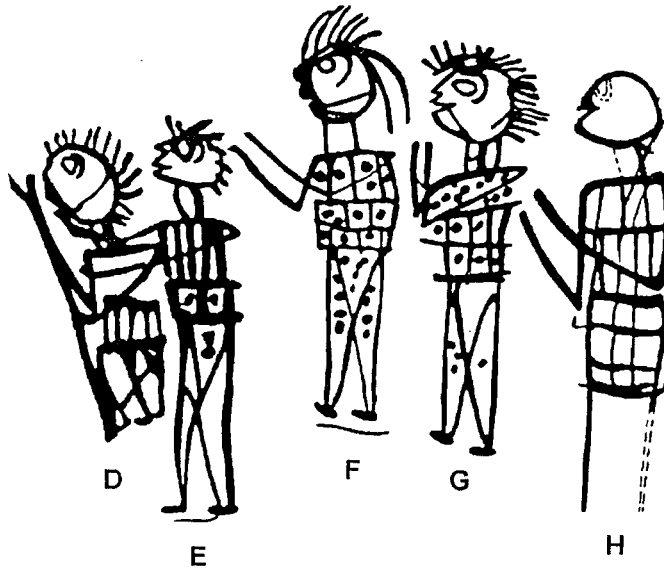


Fig. 7. Paintings on Pithos B from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (after Beck 1982:6, Fig. 3).

Also, she suggested that the first figure – Figure D – was the leader of this procession because of the stick or the staff which usually represents an old man or an elder. However, according to Beck (1982:40) the exact meaning of these figures is not yet clear.

In addition to the scene on Ahiram's sarcophagus, there are several Egyptian New Kingdom paintings showing similar ceremonial processions (Figs 8–9). In Egyptian art, the procession seems to be led by a priest wearing a leopard skin with dots, offering libation or incense, followed by women and men in gestures of prayer who are raising their hands or holding offerings in their hands. In a relief from the tomb of Paser, the vizier of Seti I and Ramses IV (Fig. 8), we may find some similarity to the procession scene on Pithos B.



Fig. 8. A relief in Theban Tomb 106 of Paser. (after Baines and Malek 1980:106–107). Drawn by MiYoung Im.

Paser, his wife and his relatives assist in the offerings and all of them are raising their forearms and face the same direction, in one line (Baines and Malek 1980:106–107). Three women are holding lotus flowers or musical instruments, perhaps sistra. Except for one bald man in the middle of the procession, they are all wearing wigs. A relief from the tomb of Raia, a Memphite musician during the reign of Ramses II, shows the bald-headed Raia in front of the female members of his family. All are standing in a line in a worship position before the image of the jackal deity Anubis, who is seated within a shrine (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Raia, a Memphite musician during the 19th Dynasty, and female members of his family worship an image of the jackal deity Anubis, in a shrine. (after Martin 1991:88). Drawn by MiYoung Im.

In the case of Figures D-H, despite the crude art, one may conclude on the basis of the Egyptian parallels that Figures D, F, and G are probably women while Figure E and bald Figure H are both men. Alternatively one may conclude that all the figures are of men if we assume that the dots on Figures F and G are representations of leopard skins. It is obvious that sometimes there is more than one person wearing a leopard skin in the Egyptian ceremonial processions. All five figures must have had transparent clothing showing their bodylines and sexual organs. The horizontal and vertical lines of the upper bodies seem to represent the folds of clothing as in Egyptian art. Perhaps four of them – Figures D-G – are wearing wigs. Figure D most probably is holding a lotus flower or a musical instrument in accordance with the Egyptian parallels.

Thus, the figures of Kuntillet 'Ajrud represent an offering procession. As mentioned before, these five figures and the Bes Figure B were drawn later than the Bes Figure A and the musician Figure C on Pithos A (Beck 1982:43). The later artist must have drawn this procession scene relating to the scene on Pithos A, which is also a scene of religious character.

## Conclusions

What do these paintings mean? The artists were obviously not skillful. The figures give the impression of a child's painting with little meaning, but one must try to understand these paintings on a different level. The two Bes figures with their arms spread and legs outstretched could be interpreted as dancing to the lyre player's music. They stand on different levels and are not the same size. Figure B stands higher and is smaller than Figure A. The left arm of Figure A and the right arm of Figure B overlap. It seems that the later artist, who added Figure B, wanted to show Figure B dancing behind Figure A.



Fig. 10. Egyptian musicians from Thebes Tomb 38 dating to 1410–1400 BCE (after Davies and Gardiner 1936: Pl. 37).

Figure C sits on a chair designed for royalty – a throne, and wears an Egyptian-style wig. Although he is wearing a leopard skin, he represents neither a Bes figure nor a god. He must represent a king, a prince or a priest. However, he plays a lyre. While Egyptian paintings portray many musicians, most of them are female and probably slaves, standing or sitting on the floor, not on a chair (Fig. 10). However, in ancient Israel it seems that the majority of musicians, particularly lyre players, are male, as known from Egyptian and Assyrian art. For instance, the lyre player shown among the group of Canaanites on the wall paintings from the MB II tomb of Beni Hasan is a man (Newberry 1893: Pl. 31). Male lyre players represented on the wall of Sennacherib's (704–681 BCE) palace in Nineveh must be captives from Judah or Phoenicia (Gadd 1936: Pl. 20). We might also mention King David who played the lyre (I Sam. 16:23).

According to the Old Testament, the Israelites played music and danced as part of their cultic expression. Music put the prophets in an ecstatic state (I Sam. 10:5). Music was also played in the Temple (I Chr. 6, 15, 16, 25, 29; II Chr. 35:15) as part of their cult and Yahweh listened to the music of the Israelites. People prophesied with lyres, harps and cymbals (I Chr. 25:1). "The music was the call for Yahweh to have mercy and to care for the people (Ps. 23:46) and curse the wicked (Ps. 58)" (Jones 1992:933). We may emphasize that the lyre players mentioned in the Old Testament are men (I Chr. 15:21, 25:1). It also seems that if a person of royalty or of a higher class is playing a musical instrument, it is done while exercising a cultic role in a religious ceremony.

In the Egyptian culture, kings were considered close to the gods, and sometimes were viewed as gods. Usually, gods and kings are depicted together and kings wore lion skins while they performed priestly duties. The artist of the paintings of Kuntillet 'Ajrud might have played upon this Egyptian idea. In fact, according to the Old Testament (I Kgs. 15:12–15; II Kgs. 18:1–7; 22:3–23:23), Israelite kings were presented as the chosen of the deity with the right to rule on earth as the god's representative and were responsible for the organization and administration of the cult including cultic reform (Whitelam 1992:46). Thus, this artist painted a king wearing a leopard skin like Egyptian royalty, sitting on a throne, and playing the lyre as part of a religious ceremony. Gods, represented as Bes figures, are dancing to the king's music. Other priests and people joined this ceremony in a line lifting their hands, which could represent a worship position. In addition, if this interpretation is acceptable, then the dots on these figures cannot be tattooing, in accord with Beck, as it was forbidden by the Israelites' law (Lev. 19:28).

The artists of Kuntillet 'Ajrud were not professionally trained. Many similarities and representations of Egyptian influence, such as the seated position with a lotus flower, occur on the wall paintings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud. One of Beck's suggestions concerning the relation between the wall paintings and the pithoi paintings is that the latter could be "study pieces" for the scenes they transferred to the walls as Egyptian artists did (Beck 1982:60). However, it is clear that the artists from Kuntillet 'Ajrud show a mixture of cultures in their paintings. Kuntillet 'Ajrud could well have acted as a station between Egypt and the Israelite-Judahite and Phoenician cultural spheres. The paintings are influenced by the representations of Egyptian gods and royalty and thus the seated musician figure might be identified as an Israelite-Judahite king, playing the lyre. The row of worshippers is part of a ceremony following Egyptian patterns. Kuntillet 'Ajrud, thus, must have been a place of religious cult as well as a desert station between Judah and Egypt. The study of the textiles from Kuntillet 'Ajrud also shows that there were mixed textile fragments (Scheffer

and Tidhar 1991), cotton and wool, which were forbidden to the Israelites. The site shows mixed influences in different aspects of religion from Egypt, Judah, Israel, and Phoenicia as proven by the pottery and the inscriptions, as well as the painted figure.

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