

AN EGYPTIAN BRONZE AEGIS

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Although the symbols of royalty and divinity still play a part in our modern life we take very much for granted the superhuman powers they imply, and the exact meaning and purpose of many of them have been obscured. The same probably held true with the ancient Egyptians and the numerous ceremonial objects used in the worship not only of their king but also of the large number of gods whom they knew. The relation of the crook and the "flail"—early attributes of rulership with an origin far back in antiquity—to the worship of Osiris, for instance, is clear: the appearance of these symbols in tombs, often in the hands of the coffin figure, showed the identity of the deceased with Osiris, the god of resurrection. But the value or significance of other sacred or cult objects is harder to explain, and may not even have been obvious to their users. A good case in point is the so-called aegis with the head of a god or goddess.

Among the Egyptian antiquities acquired by purchase in 1948 was a bronze ornament with the head of the goddess Isis, which was of very fine quality and workmanship. At the time it was reproduced in the *Bulletin* (October 1948, p. 63) it was compared to a similar object in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston that had been repaired and restored to its original shape and condition. Both examples are enlarged counterparts of the attribute

regularly placed in the left hand of the cat-headed goddess Bastet and also appearing very often as an amulet.

Since full-scale, complete examples of these objects are rare, the similarity of the Boston aegis to our new one immediately came to mind. Like the small amulet reproduced on the opposite page, it consists of the aegis proper—the broad collar surmounted by the head of a divinity—and the counterpoise, or handle, projecting in a slight curve from the back of the collar. This counterpoise was missing from our aegis. The only indications that there had been an attachment of some sort on the back were the rough, broken edge of bronze inside the back of the headdress of the goddess, where it protrudes beyond the semicircular broad collar, and two rings near the bottom of the collar, which did not seem to have any meaning.

Since 1908 there has been in the Museum an inlaid bronze handle, believed at that time to be the handle of a *menyet*, another ceremonial object, but it is obvious now that it belonged to an aegis

instead, and undoubtedly to an aegis of Isis, since it is she who is represented in the decoration on its upper part. The counterpoise is almost identical in shape and decoration with the one at the back of the Boston aegis, and since the over-all dimensions of the parts of the two objects are proportionately the same,



The goddess Bastet holding an aegis. Bequest of Mrs. Mary Anna Palmer Draper, 1915



Late dynastic aegis with a head of Isis. Rogers Fund, 1948. Below, an amulet of similar form with handle. Gift of Mrs. Lucy W. Drexel, 1889

it must originally have belonged to an aegis very similar to the one we have, or perhaps even to this very one. At the top of the counterpoise are the heavy metal tongue that fitted inside the head-dress and, on the back, loops for a hinge, both of which served to hold the handle out at right angles to the broad collar, as well as a ring just below the latter for an additional supporting rod from the back of the collar.

The counterpoise is more elaborately decorated than the aegis proper, with the incised design of figures and plants filled with gold; however, the broad collar may originally have had its decoration similarly inlaid. In the upper part a goddess, probably Isis, stands inside a kiosk, holding an *ankh* sign and a papyrus scepter, and in front of her there are hieroglyphs reading:

“The Mother of the God, who is in the midst of *Sdm* (?)” On either

edge is a torus molding ending in a cobra head, wearing on one side the crown of Upper Egypt and on the other the crown of Lower Egypt, indicating royal power over the two divisions of the kingdom. The design on the broad disk below shows the Horus hawk, a

symbol of the king, standing on a representation of the palace in the midst of a papyrus thicket and with a crowned uraeus in front of him, the whole rebus signifying Egypt.

As an attribute carried by Bastet—in which case it has the head of the goddess—the aegis may be a symbol of the divinity herself; in its small bronze amulet form, with the head of a god or goddess, it would be a votive offering. As a large cult object, which in most of the extant examples is surmounted by a head of the goddess Isis (or Isis-Hathor), it may have been carried only by female members of the royal family in ceremonies connected with the worship of Isis, who represented the ideal of motherhood and was inextricably associated with the mythological foundation of the kingdom of Egypt, arising from the union of the Two Lands.

A large cache of fine bronze objects,

including very similar aegises, was found at Mitrahineh in the early 1900's, and because of their quality the two parts we have been discussing may have come from that find and may thus be a type of cult object used in Theban temples in the late dynastic period.



Inlaid bronze counterpoise, or handle, which belonged to an aegis similar to that on page 79. Isis is shown on the upper part. Rogers Fund, 1908