

Historical Review

Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt

Chahira Kozma*

Department of Pediatrics, Georgetown University Hospital, Washington, District of Columbia

Received 3 July 2005; Accepted 10 October 2005

Ancient Egypt was one of the most advanced and productive civilizations in antiquity, spanning 3000 years before the “Christian” era. Ancient Egyptians built colossal temples and magnificent tombs to honor their gods and religious leaders. Their hieroglyphic language, system of organization, and recording of events give contemporary researchers insights into their daily activities. Based on the record left by their art, the ancient Egyptians documented the presence of dwarfs in almost every facet of life. Due to the hot dry climate and natural and artificial mummification, Egypt is a major source of information on achondroplasia in the old world. The remains of dwarfs are abundant and include complete and partial skeletons. Dwarfs were employed as personal attendants, animal tenders, jewelers, and entertainers. Several high-ranking dwarfs especially from the Old Kingdom (2700–2190 BCE) achieved important status and had lavish burial places close to the pyramids. Their costly tombs in the royal cemeteries and the inscriptions on their statues indicate their high-ranking position in Egyptian society and

their close relation to the king. Some of them were Seneb, Pereniankh, Khnumhotpe, and Djeder. There were at least two dwarf gods, Ptah and Bes. The god Ptah was associated with regeneration and rejuvenation. The god Bes was a protector of sexuality, childbirth, women, and children. He was a favored deity particularly during the Greco-Roman period. His temple was recently excavated in the Baharia oasis in the middle of Egypt. The burial sites and artistic sources provide glimpses of the positions of dwarfs in daily life in ancient Egypt. Dwarfs were accepted in ancient Egypt; their recorded daily activities suggest assimilation into daily life, and their disorder was not shown as a physical handicap. Wisdom writings and moral teachings in ancient Egypt commanded respect for dwarfs and other individuals with disabilities. © 2005 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

Key words: disability; Egyptology; ancient Egypt; dwarfism; achondroplasia; short stature

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Egyptian civilization originated over 5,000 years ago along the Nile river in northeastern Africa (Table I). The Nile river brought an unlimited supply of water to the desert and the yearly flood built a fertile valley along the riverbanks. The almost regular and predictable pattern of yearly flooding of the Nile river guaranteed irrigation of the fields and adequate food production which caused the civilization to flourish [Nunn, 1996]. The writing system using hieroglyphs was invented between 3100 and 2700 BCE, around the time when the great pyramids were being built. This was also a time of a spectacular development in mathematics, astronomy, transport, government organization, and food production. Furthermore, artists working in an array of textures and techniques created masterpieces that have lasted to the present.

The ancient Egyptians left an immense legacy about their culture, religion, gods, government's affairs, and personal and daily life through inscriptions and representations on tomb and temple walls,

documents on papyrus, and thousands of funerary objects. As a result, we are well informed about the daily life of the ancient Egyptians including that of dwarfs (Fig. 1).

Due to the hot dry climate and elaborate burial systems, congenital anomalies are well represented in ancient Egypt because of their persistence in mummified and skeletal remains. These well preserved bodies allow a study of bone and soft tissue remains. One of the best-documented genetic disorders is achondroplasia, with Egypt being a major source of skeletal remains for this condition in the ancient world.

In general, the sources of evidence of dwarfism in ancient Egypt come from biological remains and artistic evidence including funerary gifts. Written

*Correspondence to: Chahira Kozma, M.D., 2PHC, Department of Pediatrics, Georgetown University Hospital, 3800 Reservoir Rd, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007. E-mail: kozmac@georgetown.edu
cck2@gunet.georgetown.edu
DOI 10.1002/ajmg.a.31068

TABLE I. Chronology of Ancient Egypt

The Old Kingdom	3rd–8th dynasty	2700–2190 BC
The first intermediate period	9–10th dynasty	2190–2010 BC
The Middle Kingdom	11–12th dynasty	2106–1786 BC
The second intermediate period	13–17th dynasty	1786–1550 BC
The New Kingdom	18–20th dynasty	1550–1069 BC
The late period	21–30 dynasty	1069–332 BC
The Ptolemaic period	15 Ptolemies	332–40 BC

From 2686 until 332 BC, a series of 30 dynasties ruled Egypt, which were organized by historians into four periods: the Old Kingdom, Middle, New, and the Late Kingdoms. The first three periods were separated from each another by, respectively, the first and second intermediate periods. The early dynastic period lasted from 3000 to 2700 BC. The Greeks invaded Egypt in 332 BC under Alexander the Great and created the Ptolemaic Dynasties that ended with the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC and the occupation of Egypt by the Romans under Octavian (Augustus). In 641–642 AD the Arabs conquered Egypt bringing it into the Islamic world [Strouhal, 1992].



FIG. 1. A painted statue of limestone of the God Bes, the god of love, childbirth, and sexuality in ancient Egypt, 30th dynasty reign of Nectanebo II (358–341 BC). Height 92 cm. Bes is portrayed with hybrid features and sticking out his tongue. He wears a monkey skin on his back. The deeply set eyes suggest that they may have held inlays, as did the tongue. The ears are those of a lion. A serpent's body, knotted around his navel serves as a belt. The Louvre Museum, Paris.

evidence about dwarfism as a medical condition is non-existing. The medical papyri, did not mention dwarfism since the ancient Egyptians did not likely consider it to be a disorder or a disease.

The hieroglyphic words for dwarfs and pygmies are *dng* or *deneg*, *nmw*, and *hw*. A determinative or a symbol depicting a dwarf with short limbs and a normal trunk usually accompanies these words. While many types of dwarfism were documented in ancient Egypt, most skeletal remains and artistic pictures identify short-limb dwarfism, mainly achondroplasia. The ancient Egyptian artists developed standards for depicting dwarfs that deviated slightly from normal [Dasen, 1988]. They were portrayed with a small disproportionate statue. The head was large, the torso was relatively long, and both upper and lower limbs were short. The legs were frequently bowed. Often, dwarfs were illustrated with lordosis and protuberant abdomen. “Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece” provides the reader with a comprehensive review of this subject [Dasen, 1993].

The pharaohs and nobles of ancient Egypt delighted to have in their households pygmies and dwarfs. An important early written record that highlights the value placed on dwarfs in ancient Egypt was by Harkhuf. He was an army general and a high official during the time of kings Merenre¹ and Pepi II² and was a governor of Aswan in Upper Egypt. He conducted several expeditions to Africa and especially to the land of Punt or Akhtiu, thought to be near present-day Somalia and Eritrea. He inscribed on his tomb in Asswan an extraordinary letter he received from King Pepi II congratulating him about the precious treasures he brought to Egypt from Africa and especially about a pygmy who could do exotic dances and delight the heart of the king [Dawson, 1938]. The short man was called a “*dng* of the god’s dances.” An abbreviation of the letter of the child king, who was then about 8 years old follows:

“Come northward to the Residence immediately. Leave (everything) and bring this pygmy with thee, which thou hast brought living, prosperous, and healthy from the land of Akhtiu, for the dances of the god, to rejoice and gladden the heart of the king for Upper and Lower³ Egypt Neferkere⁴, may he live for ever. When he (the pygmy) goes down with thee to the vessel, appoint trustee people, who shall be about him on each side of the vessel; take care lest he fall into the water. If thou arrives of the Residence, this pygmy being with thee alive. My Majesty will do for thee a greater thing than that which was done

¹King Merenre or Nemtiemsaf I was the fourth king of the sixth dynasty (2287–2278 BCE).

²Pepi II was the last ruler of the sixth dynasty (2246–2152 BCE).

³Egypt is a country made up of two separate land areas: Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. The names refer to ones location according to the flow of the Nile River. Lower Egypt is land downstream, or to the north and Upper Egypt is land upstream, or to the south.

⁴King Neferkere is Pepi II.

for the treasurer of the God's seal-bearer Werdjedeba in the time of Isesi⁵ in accordance with the heart's desire of my Majesty to see this pygmy."

SOURCES OF EVIDENCE FOR DWARFISM

Biological Remains

Although artistic evidence for dwarfism is abundant in ancient Egypt, it could be subject to biased interpretation; thus skeletal remains provide the most objective and informative evidence of this genetic disorder.

The earliest biological evidence for dwarfism in ancient Egypt dates to a Predynastic Period called the "the Badarian Period" (4500 BCE). The specimen, an almost complete skeleton, was studied thoroughly when it was located in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in England. The skull is normal except for a slight flattening of the angle of the base of the skull. The mandible is normal. The clavicles are slender but normal in length. The radii and ulnae are remarkably small and symmetrical with the radial tuberosity and ligamentous prominences of the radii unusually pronounced. The head of the humerus is malformed and lacks the usual even contour. The small bones of the hands, the ribs, and the scapulae are essentially normal. The glenoid articular surfaces show the changes seen already in the humeral heads and in addition to attrition secondary to arthritis. The author concluded that these skeletal changes are not an example of achondroplasia, as we know it [Jones, 1932]. The current location of the specimen is unknown.

The skeleton of an adult male in a tomb of the first dynasty located in Saqqara⁶ in the tomb complex of King Wadj⁷ had changes of the long bones initially interpreted to be secondary to rickets (Fig. 2). The tibiae were very short and the fibulae bowed. The specimen is located at Cairo University, Egypt [Emery, 1954]. To other Egyptologists and scientists, the changes were attributed to short limb dwarfism, most likely that of achondroplasia due to the shortened long bones [Weeks, 1970].

Other biological evidence includes the remains of two dwarfs from the fourth dynasty Egyptian tomb of King Mersekha⁸ in the Natural History Museum in London (BMNH AF.11.4/427). Those remains have previously been examined and published. They consist of calvaria, facial bones, lower jaw, and long bones. The skull vault is of normal size. However, the



Fig. 2. Skeleton of a male adult dwarf. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society, London. When unearthed, the tomb was unlooted and contained four different types of jars.

skull base is shortened as evidenced by the very short basi occipital diameter. The shortened skull base contributes to the appearance of a depression in the middle third of the face. The nasal bones and the frontal processes of the maxilla are broad and the short face is accentuated by the prognathism of the alveolar portion of the maxilla. The secondary teeth and the fused epiphyses and apophyses implicate young adulthood. The long bones, which consist of a left humerus, right femur, three tibiae, and two fibulae are very short. The tibiae have slight medial bowing of the distal half. The humerus is short with the abnormal joint pathology associated with achondroplasia (Fig. 3). The bones have relatively normal diameter of the shafts and epiphyses [Putschar and Ortner, 1985].

Examination of the skeleton of the dwarf Perniankhu whose statue is described later under the section of artistic evidence, revealed that he was almost 40 years of age when he died. The facial part of his skull is missing but the rest of his skeleton shows the characteristic traits of achondroplasia: short and squat upper and lower limbs. Furthermore, the measurements of the foreshortened arms and legs of the skeleton seem to match these of his statue and

⁵King Isesi, also known as Djedkare, was the eighth ruler of the fifth dynasty (2414–2375 BCE).

⁶Saqqara is an immense ancient necropolis south of Cairo.

⁷King Wadj also called Wadjit, or Uadji believed to be the 3rd king of the first dynasty.

⁸King Semerkhet or Mersekha ruled ancient Egypt from 3080 to 3072 BCE.



FIG. 3. Specimen BMNH AF.11.41427 representing the long bones of 2 dwarfs. Courtesy of the Natural History Museum, London.

it may be well that there was a realistic attempt to model Perniankhu's skeletal disorder. Additional studies in Egypt suggest that there was a burial area near the great Pyramids for high-ranking Old Kingdom dwarfs. A skeleton of a female dwarf revealed the cause of her death since she was found with a baby's remains in situ. She most likely needed a Cesarean section for a safe delivery. However, such surgical capability was not available at that time and she died before the child was delivered [Filer, 1995].

ARTISITC EVIDENCE

The pictorial sources of dwarfs in ancient Egypt especially during the Old Kingdom are quite abundant and include tomb and vase paintings, statues, and minor arts. A funerary gift depicting a female dwarf was found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun⁹. It is on display at Cairo Museum, Egypt. The female dwarf is naked with two bracelets and armlets and wears a wig of short curly hair. She has the typical facial features and bodily characteristics of achondroplasia. In addition, she has bowed legs and clubfeet deformity.

Artistic evidence indicates that dwarfs were employed as personal attendants, overseers of linen, animal tenders, jewelers, dancers, and entertainers. There was a significant value placed on dwarfs in ancient Egypt [Ghalioungui and El Dawakhly, 1965]. There were several elite dwarfs from the Old Kingdom who achieved important status and had a lavish burial place in the royal cemetery close to the pyramids. Their names and titles were inscribed on their funerary statues or reliefs. They were Seneb, Pereniankh, Khnumhotpe, and Djeder.

ELITE DWARFS

Dwarf Seneb and his Family

The statue of Seneb and his family was found in his tomb, which was excavated between the years 1925 and 1926 in the Giza¹⁰ necropolis near the Pyramids. The dwarf Seneb served during the fourth dynasty of pharaohs Khufu¹¹ and Djeder¹². Seneb statue is on display at Cairo Museum. It represents an excellent portrait of ancient Egyptian art depicting a family group with a great sense of harmony and balance. Seneb, the father, was most likely an achondroplastic dwarf. His wife and children are of average size. Seneb is seated in the position of a scribe next to his wife on a rectangular seat. His head is carefully placed at the same level as that of his wife. He has short hair, large eyes, and a pronounced nose and mouth. He wears a short white kilt and his skin is painted an ochre tone. His upper and lower extremities show the typical proximal shortening characteristic of achondroplasia (Fig. 4). His mild facial features however can be suggestive of hypochondroplasia. Ancient Egyptian artists frequently depicted achondroplastic dwarfs with normal facies most likely due to conventional reasons. However,

⁹King Tutankhamun was the 12th ruler of the 18th dynasty (1336–1327 BCE).

¹⁰The Giza Plateau is located on the west bank of the Nile opposite Cairo, the capital of Egypt. It contains the pyramids and the sphinx as well as numerous temples and tombs.

¹¹King Khufu was the 2nd king of the fourth dynasty. He built the Great Pyramid at Giza (2609–2584 BCE).

¹²King Djeder or Redjedef was the son of Khufu and the 3rd ruler of the fourth dynasty. (2575–c. 2465 BCE).



FIG. 4. Statuary group of the dwarf Seneb and his family. Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

since his skeleton was never found, an accurate diagnosis cannot be made. Underneath Seneb are two of their three children, a boy and a girl, both of them are holding their fingers to their mouths, as was normally used to represent children in ancient Egypt. The ancient Egyptian artist who crafted Seneb's statue was very skillful and sensitive. He made a balance and symmetry of the group by placing the two children where Seneb's legs would have been [Tiradritti, 1999].

Dwarf Pereniankh or Per-ni-ankh-w “the Dancing Dwarf”

The tomb of Pereniankh, which dates to the Old Kingdom was discovered in the late 1980s. It was located in the vicinity of the great Pyramids. Pereniankh was a court official in the fifth or sixth dynasty. The tomb contained the skeleton of Pereniankh, his statue, skeletons of two women including that of his wife, and earthenwares. Pereniankh is shown seated on a chair and wears a short kilt. His neck is short and thick. His round oval face is reminiscent of third or fourth dynasty sculpture. While his facial characteristics are normal, his limbs and especially his legs are short and consistent with the diagnosis of achondroplasia, which was confirmed by examination of his skeleton. His legs are different in size possibly due to elephantiasis or other medical conditions. Both sides of his chair are inscribed with his name and titles, “the dancing dwarf in the Great Palace, the one who pleased his majesty everyday, Per-ni-ankh-w.” Because the tomb was located near the tomb of the dwarf Seneb and of other characteristics, Egyptologists have suggested that Pereniankh was the father



FIG. 5. The dwarf Djeho.

of Seneb [Hawass, 2004]. The statue is on display at Cairo Museum, Egypt.

Dwarf Djeho

The profile figure of the dwarf Djeho depicts the owner at life-size measuring 120 cm. His naked figure is carved on the lid of his sarcophagus, which is made out of granite and is of superb workmanship. It is on display at Cairo Museum, Egypt. The sarcophagus dates to the late period during the time of King Nectanebo II¹³. The figure shows an accurate depiction of the features of achondroplasia. The dwarf Djeho has a prominent forehead, depressed nasal bridge, and an enlarged anterior–posterior diameter of his skull. His hands are short and reach to

¹³King Nectanebo II, was the last ruler of the 30th dynasty (he reigned between 360–343 BCE).

the hips and both upper and lower limbs reveal proximal shortening. The back shows some degree of kyphosis, the abdomen is protruded, and he has male genitalia (Fig. 5). Hieroglyphic inscriptions on the lid indicate that he belonged to the household of a high official [Baines, 1992].

Dwarf Khnumhotep

The dwarf Khnumhotep dates back to the Old Kingdom. His name was found on his statue. He achieved courtly status, held the title “Overseer of Clothing,” and ka-priest¹⁴. His titles suggest that he belonged to the household of a high official. His small figurine, which measures 18 inches and is made out of painted limestone, is on display at Cairo museum, Egypt. It was found in Saqqara and is one of most famous of Old Kingdom sculptures. The dwarf Khnumhotep has large cranial vault and elongated skull, however his facial features are normal. He has shortening of the proximal parts of his upper limbs. He wears a kilt that slopes at his waist and reaches below his knees. His lower limbs are especially short. His back is arched, his abdomen is protruded, and he has a stocky torso [Sampsel, 2001].

DWARF GODS

There were several anonymous dwarf gods in ancient Egypt. The dwarf gods, Ptah and Bes were the best known and were involved in magical practices to protect the living and the dead.

God Ptah (Pataikos)

According to ancient Egyptian belief, Ptah was the god who molded people out of clay and gave them the breath of life, which relates to the original creation of man. Herodotus¹⁵, the famous Greek historian, called this god Pataikos, due to its similarity to the Phoenician god of the same name. The term Pataikos is derived from the ancient Egyptian word “ptah,” which means to open [Aterman, 1999]. The god Ptah was associated with regeneration and rejuvenation. Ptah was worshiped as the creator of the universe. In addition, he gave life to the other gods by means of his heart and his tongue. His nature as a supreme artisan was emphasized and he was seen as the patron god of craftsmen. He was especially revered at Deir el-Medina, the village where the craftsmen who built the tombs in the Valley of the Kings¹⁶ lived. He is usually depicted as bearded man wearing a skullcap, shrouded like a mummy, and his hands emerging from the wrappings in the front.

¹⁴The ka was the life force in ancient Egypt.

¹⁵Herodotus was an ancient historian who lived in the 5th century BC (484–425 BC).

¹⁶The Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt contains many of the tombs of pharaohs from the New Kingdom.



FIG. 6. The god Ptah. Courtesy of the Walters Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.

The god Ptah, who is occasionally represented as an achondroplastic dwarf, is quite distinct from the god Bes. In his dwarf form, he is portrayed as a naked human and mostly depicted in amuletic forms especially at the end of the New Kingdom. He has short limbs, long trunk, and a large head and does not carry weapons. He has numerous representations in amulets (Fig. 6). In this picture, he is depicted standing with his arms hanging down to the sides, with closed fists. He has a side lock symbolic of youth on the right side of the head giving him a youthful appearance.

God Bes

The origin of the cult of Bes continues to be debated among Egyptologists. Some have suggested that he was an imported deity from Nubia or Africa from the south of Egypt due to his emphasized features that include full lips, broad flat nose, and feathered head dress. However, most theories about the god Bes being a foreign deity imported have been disregarded and the image of Bes is considered pure Egyptian. His iconography is very abundant and occurs in a wide range of objects and media including sandstones, wood, and glazed faience.

Frequently, the god Bes is shown in a hybrid nature combining animal and human features, large skull,

rhizomelic shortening of the upper and lower limbs, a lion mane emphasizing his ferocious attitude, and a tail. Often he wears a monkey skin on his back.

His main function was a repeller of evil. In the Old Kingdom, he was depicted in association with fertility, circumcision, and harvest rituals. In the Middle Kingdoms, his role evolves into becoming a guardian of the home; infants, new mothers, and he often assisted Taweret, the Hippopotamus goddess of pregnancy in protecting women during childbirth [Hawass, 2000]. Indeed, the most important role assigned to Bes was the protection of the mother and child during the dangerous time of childbirth. A spell to help with birth complications could be recited four times over a clay figure of the god Bes that had been placed on the head of the woman in labor. The god Bes was often depicted holding drums or tambourines and making noises to drive away demons (Fig. 7).

The god Bes was particularly associated with bringing prosperity and protection of the home. His figures were placed inside houses, painted on walls, and incorporated into furniture such as beds and chairs [Hecht, 1990]. During the Greco-Roman periods, Bes was shown with a fierce look, brandishing knives and swords, indicating that his role as a



FIG. 7. Wooden figure of the god Bes playing a tambourine from Thebes, Egypt 18th dynasty, around 1300 BC. EA 20865. Courtesy of the British Museum, London.



FIG. 8. Dwarfs jewelers. Tomb of Mereruka. Saqqara, Egypt. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, Chicago, USA.

protector extended to warfare against evils. The god Bes was a favored deity during the Greco-Roman period and his temple was recently excavated in the Baharia oasis in the middle of Egypt. The temple yielded a large statue of the god Bes measuring 4 feet and is currently on display at Cairo Museum, Egypt.

ORDINARY DWARFS

Dwarfs were depicted in at least 50 tombs in funerary art of the Old Kingdom both at the vast necropolises of Giza and Saqqara. Consequently, it is possible to draw a conclusion about their societal role at that period. The repetition of certain pictures in tombs shows that dwarfs specialized in certain occupations including jewelry makers, animal or pet handlers, fishermen, keeper of the wardrobe, entertainers and dancers, supervisor of clothing and linen, and personal attendants [Hamada and Rida, 1972]. Female dwarfs served as nurses for young children and worked as mid wives assisting in delivery.

In several tombs from Old Kingdom, group of male dwarfs are shown making necklaces. In a superb scene from the tomb of Mereruka, dwarfs were depicted making jewelry among other average-size workers (Fig. 8). The tomb of Mereruka is the largest in Saqqara and document many aspects of life in ancient Egypt. Mereruka was a vizier or a minister to king Teti¹⁷ and he was also married to his daughter. The scene of dwarfs from the tomb of Mereruka is divided into three parts. In the upper third, a variety of events are taking places by sculptors, vase makers, carpenters, and metal workers. In the middle third, there are complete masterpieces of jewelry. In the lowest registry, similar articles are being completed. Two average height workers hold up a completed collar with falcon-headed terminals and an outermost row of pendants. Next to them are two dwarf workers, displaying a choker, which is supported by a high table. Beyond them two more dwarfs sit putting the finishing touches to a keyhole-shaped pectoral [Andrews, 1997].

On many tomb walls from Old Kingdom, dwarfs look after household pets, especially dogs, and monkeys. This role appears to be restricted to male dwarfs who frequently tamed monkeys. In a relief

¹⁷King Teti was the First king of the Sixth dynasty.



FIG. 9. Dwarf tending a monkey. Relief from the tomb of Nefer, Giza, Egypt, Old Kingdom, 2180 BC (Pelizaeus-Museum inv. no. 2390)". © Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim.

from the Old Kingdom tomb of Nefer in Giza that dates back to the sixth dynasty (2180 BC), a dwarf is holding a monkey on his head, both standing en miniature under the chair of the tomb owner (Fig. 9).

Several reliefs from the Old Kingdom tombs depict male and females dwarf entertainers, dancing, singing, or playing music. A limestone figurine from the tomb of Nikainpu at Giza depicts a sitting dwarf playing the harp (Fig. 10). The facial features and short limbs of the dwarf musician are characteristic of achondroplasia. In the tomb of the high official Nuntjer in Giza, a small woman, most likely a female dwarf is in the middle of two group of average height woman performing a lively dance [Arnold, 1999]. She wears a wreath of flowers on her head and wears a belt with strips. The average-size dancers wear crossed short kilts with shoulders straps (Fig. 11). Cairo Museum has amuletic figures depicting naked ethnic pygmies dancing. These figurines date back to the 12th dynasty. The little figures had holes and were connected to strings which, when pulled, would make the dancers move.



FIG. 10. Dwarf playing the harp. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute, Chicago, USA.



FIG. 11. Female dwarf dancer. Courtesy of Kunsthistorisches Museum, Ägyptisch-Orientalische Sammlung, Vienna, A 8028.

CONCLUSION

Several Egyptologists and researchers have concluded that the image of short people in ancient Egypt is essentially positive [Sullivan, 2001]. Achondroplastic dwarfs had magical significance and they were associated with the sun god. Numerous figurines and amulets were formed in their shape. The function of the dwarfs was for the protection of the living and the dead from dangers facing them including diseases, venomous animals, snakes, crocodiles, and other dangers. In several New Kingdom papyri, they are described as rising up to the sky and going down to the underworld. In incantation three against the snakes in the Magical and Medical Papyri of the New Kingdom, the name of dwarf is invoked for protection from the snakes: "O, dwarf! My magical powers are against my enemies. To render the influence of the poison of the snakes harmless. May they be free from intrusion for ever." In the same papyrus the dwarf god is invoked to stand by the speaker: "O that dwarf of the sky, O that dwarf of the sky. O dwarf great of face, with high back and short thighs. O great pillars, extending from the sky to the underworld. O Lord of the great corps which rests in Heliopolis. O great living lord" [Leitz, 1999]. Women in childbirth also invoked the help of dwarf gods. In a magical papyrus at Leiden, there is a spell to facilitate birth, called "the spell of the dwarf": "O good dwarf, come, because of the one who sent you...come down placenta, come down placenta, come down! The prayer was to be spoken four times over a dwarf of clay placed upon the vertex of the woman who is giving birth." In the spell of the Vulva the woman in pain shouts: "To the man for a dwarf-statute of clay" [Borghouts, 1971].

Another indication of the positive attitude toward dwarfs in ancient Egypt is revealed in moral and wisdom teachings. Ancient Egyptians had a strict code of ethics as expressed by the New Kingdom Instructions of Amenemope who lived during the reign of Amenhotep III¹⁸. The instructions of

¹⁸Amenhotep III was the Ninth King of Egypt's 18th dynasty (1391–1354 BCE).

Amenemope commanded respect for dwarfs and other individuals with handicapping conditions:

*Do not jeer at a blind man nor tease a dwarf
Neither interfere with the condition of a cripple;
Do not taunt a man who is in the band of God,
Nor scowl at him if he errs.*

Additional instructions of Amenemope give positive images of attitudes toward human limits. It also teaches that care for the old, sick, and malformed is a moral duty, because “*Man is clay and straw, the God is his builder. The Wise Man should respect people affected by reversal of fortune*” [Simpson, 1973].

In summary, the artistic sources provide a rich legacy and documentations of the positions of dwarfs in daily life in ancient Egypt especially in the Old Kingdom Period. Dwarfs were likely accepted in ancient Egypt and were given a visible role in the society. Furthermore their daily activities suggest integration in daily life and that their disorder was not shown as a physical handicap.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my husband, Samir Gabriel, DDS, for taking several of the pictures in the article.

REFERENCES

- Aterman K. 1999. From Horus the child to Hephaestus who limps: A romp through history. *AJMG* 83:53–63.
- Andrews C. 1997. *Ancient Egyptian jewelry*. New York: Harry N Abrams. 71p.
- Arnold D. 1999. *When the pyramids were built*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 52.
- Baines J. 1992. Merit by proxy: The biographies of the dwarf Djeho and his patron Tjaiharpta. *J E A* 78:241–257.
- Borghouts JF. 1971. *The magical tests of papyrus Leiden*. Leiden: Brill Publishing Company. p. 29.
- Dasen V. 1988. Dwarfism in Egypt and classical antiquity: Iconography and medical history. *Med Hist* 32:253–276.
- Dasen V. 1993. *Dwarfs in ancient Egypt and Greece*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dawson WR. 1938. Pygmies and dwarfs in ancient Egypt. *J Egypt Arch* 24:85–189.
- Emery WB. 1954. *Great tombs of the first dynasty; excavations at Saqqara*. Cairo: Government Press. 36p.
- Filer J. 1995. *Disease, Egyptian bookshelf*. London: The British Museum Press. p 36–39.
- Ghalioungui P, El Dawakhly Z. 1965. *Health and Healing in ancient Egypt*. Al-Maaref, Cairo: Egyptian Organization for Authorship and Translation. p 19–20.
- Hamada G, Rida A. 1972. Orthopaedics and orthopaedic diseases in ancient and modern Egypt. *Clin Orthop Relat Res* 89:253–268.
- Hawass Z. 2000. *Valley of the Golden Mummies*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 169p.
- Hawass Z, 2004. The dancing dwarf. *The Ambassadors Online Magazine*. The forum for culture and civilization. Volume 7-Issue 2. Available at <http://ambassadors.net/selectedstudy.htm>. Accessed June 30, 2005.
- Hecht F. 1990. Bes, Aesop and Morgante: Reflections of achondroplasia. *Clin Genet* 37:279–282.
- Jones EWAH. 1932. *Studies in achondroplasia*. *J Anat* 66:569–573.
- Leitz C. 1999. *Magical and medical papyri of the New Kingdom*. London: British Museum Press. p 11–45.
- Nunn JF. 1996. *Ancient Egyptian medicine*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press. p 8–23.
- Putschar WGJ, Ortner DJ. 1985. Identification of pathological conditions in human Skeletal remains. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. p 331–332.
- Sampsell BM. 2001. Ancient Egyptian dwarfs. *KMT* 12:60–73.
- Simpson WK. 1973. Simpson WK, editor. *The literature of ancient Egypt*, New edn. With translations by RO Faulkner, EF Wente, WK Simpson. New Haven: Yale University Press. p 244–262.
- Strouhal E. 1992. *Life of the ancient Egyptians*. Norman: University of Oklahoma. p 267–268.
- Sullivan R. 2001. Deformity: A modern western prejudice with ancient origins. *Pro R Coll Physicians Edinb* 31:262–266.
- Tiradritti F. 1999. *Egyptian treasures-from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*. New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., Publishers. p 74–75.
- Weeks KR. 1970. *The anatomical knowledge of the ancient Egyptians and the representation of the figure in Egyptian art*. PhD Thesis. Yale University.