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THE CONSTRUCTION OF PHYSICAL OTHERNESS IN ANCIENT ICONOGRAPHY

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SUMMARY

In Antiquity, the ideal body is a construction within a visual system combining symmetry and specific physical proportions. Few literary and iconographic records relate to genetic disorders. Our modern notion of "disability" covers a large variety of physical limitations, more or less severe, spectacular or invisible, eased or not by special devices, that did not form a consistent group in the past. Physical handicap as a category did not exist in Antiquity. Among genetic conditions, short-statured persons represent a spectacular exception. Their anomalous bodies are displayed in various media and contexts. Their disorder qualified them with special competences. The study of these "interstitial figures », physically and mentally fit, contributes to the scholarly debate on the definition of otherness, dis-ability and tolerance in past societies.

This paper presents reflections on the contribution of iconography to the definition of physical otherness in classical antiquity, in the search of its perception by the ancients. The topic is complex, as it involves deconstructing the projection of modern concepts, such as that of 'disability', that do not fit ancient views for different reasons. Today, the notion of "disability" covers a large variety of physical limitations, more or less severe, spectacular or invisible, eased or not by special devices, that did not form a consistent group in the past. Physical handicap as a category did not exist in Antiquity. The

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notions of "social" or "community model", and more recently of "abledeism" *versus* "abledness", focus on the social perception and construction of disability. Many persons suffered from congenital or acquired physical defects in all classes of the society. Martha L. Rose convincingly argued that the sparseness of information about disabled persons and the absence of clear standard for the disposal of malformed infants in ancient Greece suggest a high level of tolerance in a time with no clear dichotomy between ability and dis-ability[1].

Often neglected, the study of iconography is most informative. Pictures provide a visual discourse on physical perfection and otherness, as important as is the written one. For long it was misunderstood. At first sight, ancient imagery illustrates a normative physical ideal, defined in terms of proportion, *summetria*, between the parts of the body associated with the notions of *timion,* 'valuable', and *theion*, divine', as in the *scala naturae* of Aristotle. The well-known type of the *kouros, kalos kai megethos*, 'beautiful and tall', represents an ideal physical form, but how far was it really viewed as the norm? The concept of *holokleria*, 'physical wholeness' was crucial for religious positions[2], but did it imply that those who deviated from it were despised, rejected or even suppressed in ancient Greece? Or are these alledged social consequences a modern construction? The exposure of malformed newborn babies was legally admitted, but the extent of the practice is still much debated.

Since the 18th century, visual arts were used to elaborate an ideological discourse on bodily perfection[3]. The Vatican Apollo is a good example of how Greek art could become an icon and an instrument of scientific racism. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) describes in his *History of Art in Antiquity* (1764) how the so-called Greek profile, consisting of

> *… a nearly straight or gently concave line, which describes the forehead and nose on youthful heads, especially female ones […] « is the chief*

> *characteristic of a high beauty […] That a cause of beauty resides in this profile is proven by its opposite: the stronger indentation of the nose, the more it deviates from beautiful form*[4].

In the work on skull types by the Dutch physician Petrus Camper, a hierarchy is scientifically established from ape to Europeans, ending with the *Apollo Belvedere* as the highest evolved life-form[5]. Similarly, an engraving in the last volume of the French version of the *Physiognomische Fragmente* by Johann Kaspar Lavater (1803) depicts the stages of evolution, from the frog into the Vatican Apollo[6]. These demonstrations did not take into account the fact that the Ancients were aware that this ideal type is a forgery. Discussing with the painter Parrhasios, Socrates thus advises to look for several individuals and not a single one as model:

> *And further, when you copy types of beauty, it is so difficult to find a perfect model that you combine the most beautiful details of several, and thus contrive to make the whole look beautiful*[7].

Johann Joachim Winckelmann also reckoned it:

> *Ancient artists proceeded like a skilled gardener, who grafts different shoots of a noble species onto one stem. They sought to combine beauty from many beautiful bodies*[8].

Far from these modern assumptions, how can ancient iconography contribute to understanding physical norms and collective attitudes towards anomalous bodies? The example of dwarfs[9], persons suffering from bone deformities, and characterised by a marked short stature, is especially relevant because this condition is easily identifiable in art. The large number of depictions contrasts with the paucity of extant written sources. In a historiographical perspective, however, it must be noted that until the mid 20th century, many scholars first dismissed these pictures as caricatures because of the purity of Greek

art[10]. The limit between caricature and portrait may indeed be thin, but this does not imply that Athenian vase painters did not describe real individuals. Often skeletal dysplasia can be securely identified. Most depictions show persons with disproportionate, short-limbed bodies with characteristics reproduced with great care without being disrespectful: a long muscular trunk, with short, bent arms and legs, the fingertip reaches only to the top of the thighs or to the hips level, a pronounced pelvic tilt induces lumbar lordosis and prominent abdomen and buttocks. The head displays typical facial malformations: a depression at the root of the nose, a bulging forehead, enhanced by incipient baldness, thick lips, and a strong lower jaw revealed by sparse side-whiskers spread along the cheeks[11].

No Greek law deprived a person from citizen rights because of an unusual physical appearance, and hence a dwarf born from Athenian parents could be a full member of the *polis*. Their civic status thus depended first on the social position of their family.

Iconography and medical definitions

These visual characteristics correspond to the categories conceptualized in biological texts. Ancient authors designate pathological dwarfs with two terms, *pygmaioi* or *nanoi*, used as synonymous as in art, where mythical pygmies are depicted like achondroplastic dwarfs.

Aristotle uses the generic category of proportion to define the condition in terms of dis-proportions between the parts of the body. In the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle thus describes a *nanos* as a person with an overlarge upper body, and a small lower part, "where the weight is supported and where locomotion is effected". He associates them with children. Because of their large heads and feeble lower members, "all children are dwarfs", and creep instead of walking. An oversized head also induces metabolic troubles. It hampers reasoning and memory, and like children, dwarfs need much sleep;

Fig. 1. Krater, once in Zurich market. After Arete, *Galerie für Antike Kunst, Griechische Schalen und Vasen*, Liste 20, n.d., no 37.

the warmth provided by food is cooled by their large upper parts, and the resultant flowing back of the cold paralyses their system for a longer time than usual, inducing deep sleep[12]. In the *History of Animals*[13], Aristotle adds that dwarfs have an abnormally large phallus, like small mules, *ginnoi*. Only in the *Problems*[14], a late compilation of Aristotelian treatises, does the author distinguish between two types of dwarfs: disproportionate, who "have limbs of children", and proportionate, "small as a whole", who look like human miniatures. He attributes the disorder to a lack of place or to a disease during gestation[15]. Aristotle adds that the condition may also be due to a lack of food or space during early infancy; he illustrates this theory

by describing how some people "try to reduce the size of animals after birth, for instance by bringing up puppies in quail cages", where their limbs progressively crush and bend[16]. The view of Aristotle is thus mainly negative. Dwarfs and children form an inferior category of beings, close to animals, because they have disproportionate bodies inducing deficient physical and mental capacities. Intellectual deficiencies may be counterbalanced by other qualities that the author describes with the term *dunamis*[17].

Apart from Aristotle, only the Hippocratic treatise *On Generation* (late 5th century BC), describes how a child is born with a small size (*leptos*), weak (*asthenes*) or crippled (*anaperos*)[18]. These vague terms could also apply to restricted growth. Growth disturbances are related to the time of gestation, if the womb is too narrow, or does not close well, and loses the nutriment for the child. Thus we may infer that dwarfism was seen as a disorder either acquired during pregnancy, or inherited from abnormal parents, according to the pangenesis theory.

Dwarfs do not occur in medical texts of later periods. Most likely, the silence is due to the fact that the condition was not regarded as a disease, and did not imply special medical care. At Epidaurus, no extant votive inscription refers to restricted growth[19].

Dwarfs and satyrs

Most representations of dwarfs are found on 5th century BC attic vase-painting. Physically and mentally fit, were dwarfs regarded as physically impaired, or as blemished? Some scholars associate physical beauty with social integration. J. M. Padgett thus assumes that the dwarf depicted on a pelike in Boston can only be a slave and a foreigner: "Everything about the dwarf – size, nakedness, deformity, subordinate position – emphasises his social inferiority. In fact, he is almost certainly a slave, whose foreign origin, physical deformity, and status as property make him the ultimate Other"[20]. However, ico-

nography reveals a more ambivalent status. Dwarfs were integrated within Athenian social and religious life thanks to their integration into the thiasos of Dionysos. Attic vase-painters used them like satyrs to explore physical and behavioural norms. The resemblance is constructed by various means. The generic features of dwarfs and satyrs are similar, such as a balding head with snub-nose, side-whiskers, a beard, as well as enlarged genitals.

Several scenes show dwarfs performing before Dionysos, replacing satyrs, as if their physical anomaly made them enter without transformation the supernatural world of the god. On a krater in private collection (fig. 2), a dwarf dances on a table, holding a *tympanon*. At his right, a maenad accompanies him with the music of a flute, while at his left a thoughtful satyr and Dionysos himself, leaning on his thyrsos, contemplate his performance. All three are crowned with ivy, and a branch hangs above the dwarf to emphasize the Dionysiac

Fig. 2. Oinochoe, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1971.866. Author's drawing

context. The satyr and the maenad refer to real humans transported into the mythical thiasos by the performance of the rites. Only the dwarf has no supernatural characteristics, such as a tail or animal ears. He appears as the human counterpart of a satyr.

Interactions with women can also imitate satyrs' manners. On an oinochoe by the Phiale Painter (fig. 3), the dwarf dances towards a muffled female partner like a lascivious demon, perhaps in a ritual festive context. His hopping step with outstretched arms imitates the unsuccessful gesticulations of satyrs attempting to catch a maenad. The painter experimented a way to express sexual pursuit by depicting a phallus flying towards the woman. The attitude of the woman, stooping forward on an outstretched leg, her weight resting on that flexed behind, does not express fright, but evokes the dancing step performed by maenads with satyrs.

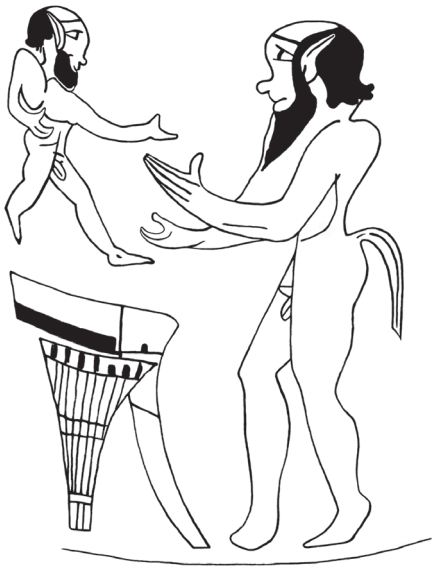

Fig. 3. Lekythos. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 00.351. Author's drawing

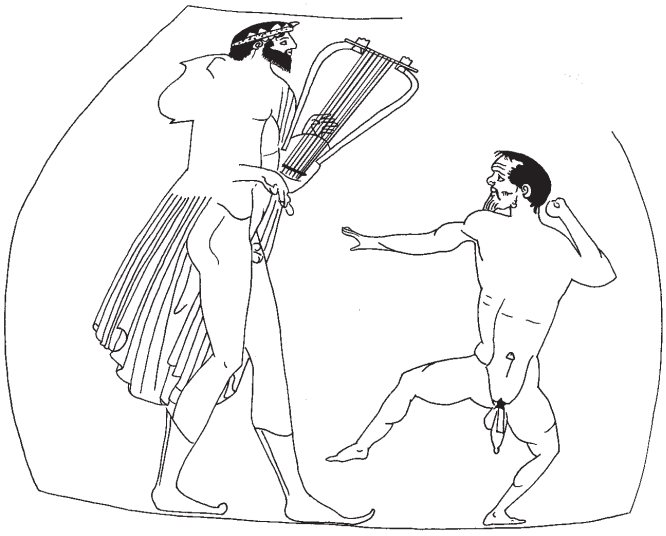

Fig. 4. Oinochoe. New York, Gift of Nelson Bunker Hunt, 1982.474. Author's drawing

The assimilation of dwarfs with satyrs may be complete in pictures of miniature satyrs, animated like children, but with a beard like adults (fig. 4)[21].

Dwarfs entertainers

Most depictions show dwarfs dancing in a sympotic context. Their physical difference made them attractive. Their performances may derive from the archaic tradition studied by Burkhard Fehr of *akletoi*, "uninvited guests", beggars intruding at the banquet and self-ridiculing themselves for the pleasure of aristocratic guests[22]. Ancient sources allude to their obscene behaviour inciting laughter and the offering of a meal. Literary sources do not mention *akletoi* in the 5th century social context, but the hiring of professional jugglers, singers and dancers[23]. In Hellenistic and Roman sources, dwarfs appear as sorts of clowns, earning a living with their anomalous body[24].

Beside several komos scenes where dwarfs dance alone[25], two scenes associate a dwarf with full-sized banqueters. Are they short-statured citizens participating to the *komos*, or professionals amusing a drinking-party?

The first one is an oinochoe attributed to the Niobid Painter (fig. 5)[26]. A naked dwarf dances before a reveller playing a lyre (*barbitos*), crowned with ivy and carrying a jug on his shoulder, on his way to the drinking-party. The painter carefully observed the anatomy of the short-sized man performing vigorously before the musician, enhancing features common with satyrs: his profile head displays a bulging and wrinkled overhead, a snub nose, tousled hair and a shaggy beard. His body, seen in front, with spread-eagled legs, provoca-

Fig. 5. Column krater, once in London. After Sotheby 14.12.1995, no 140

tively exhibits a large sex. His rhythmic gestuality, one fist closed, the other arm extended, recalls the animated dances of satyrs, such as those dancing with *aulos* and *barbitos* on a krater in Bonn[27]. His pugnacious movements could also mimic a boxing match ending his performance, as in Lucian of Samosata[28]. The dance alludes to entertainment, but is it performed by a free or enslaved person? The dwarf was perhaps part of a company, like the bronze group of three Hellenistic dancers with contorted attitudes found in the shipwreck of Mahdia near Tunisia, a man and a woman forming clearly a group who may have earned a living as travelling acrobats[29].

Looking and behaving like a satyr did not imply being an outcast, as suggested by another scene depicted on a column krater once in the London market (fig. 6)[30]. The dwarf is part of a group of revellers who may be leaving the symposion after having drunk too much. On the left, a man holds a torch, indicating a walk late in the night. On the right, another one holds the cup used in the drinking-party. In the middle, the dwarf walks with a musician playing the kithara who seems to vacillate. Is he an attendant, holding the musician's walk-

Fig. 6. Caeretan hydria, Vienna, Kunsthist. Museum IV 3577. Author's drawing

ing stick, or a standard reveller, helping a companion, and carrying his own? No visual element reveals a discriminatory position. Apart from the size, the only difference is that the dwarf wears a festive floral crown, unlike the full-sized men wearing large headbands.

Conclusion

Iconography cannot provide concrete answers about the life of short-statured persons in ancient Athens, but visual conventions allow us to access to mental representations. A number of correspondances between images and texts can be noted. First, ancient terminology is consistent with iconography; pictures, like words, do not distinguish betweeen little Greek men ad exotic Pygmies. The main characteristic is proportion or disproportion. Second, scientific categorisation may reflect folk beliefs, before they were expressed in literature, such as Aristotle's association of dwarfs with children and animals, well reflected in myth and iconography[31], and their relation to satyrs. Dwarfs formed a social group with a paradoxical position in the Greek *polis*. A pathological short-stature made a person "different" within the community, as did other physical disorders, but without being associated with a defect or an illness. Dwarfs were not depicted as dis-abled, on the contrary. Their comic behaviour, often enhanced by shameless body language, takes place in festive contexts that shaped Athenian social life. They are fully part of the *polis* thanks to their integration in the Dionysiac thiasos. Like satyrs, they stand between two worlds, human and divine, experimenting the limits of human nature, and reflecting in a burlesque way the order of the *polis*. Far from being outcasts and stigmatized, short-statured persons were appreciated because of their physical appearance. Most of them are characterised as free men, with the status of costly attendants and professional entertainers in wealthy households.

This case study shows the limits of an investigation based on a modern concept. The sparseness of information about disabled persons

and the absence of clear standards for the disposal of malformed infants in ancient Greece suggest a high level of tolerance in a time with no clear dichotomy between ability and dis-ability. Ancient families and communities could accommodate a large range of physical impairments that need not involve economic dependence, or segregation. The study of human remains regularly confirms that care was provided to persons afflicted by severe developmental defects, especially among the elite[32].

As Martin Schmidt has shown in 1983[33], the myth of the lame god Hephaistos suggests forms of tolerance and aversion to exposure. The newborn child was thrown down from Olympus by his mother Hera because of his 'disgraceful' deformity, lameness, but this deed is described as a shameful act. Hera behaved as an abnormal mother, « with a dog face », deprived of feelings[34]. The abandoned child survived. Hephaistos was reared by Thetis and the Nymphs, and had a successful destiny, as a gifted blacksmith and a magician. The iconography of his crooked feet, well evidenced in the archaic period as on a Caeretan hydria (525-520 BC) (fig. 6). As Marcello Barbanera pointed out, the depiction of a physically impaired god is unique in Greek art and intricately blending scorn and wonder for manual crafts[35].

Today, as in ancient societies, a normative ideal prevails, social control implies physical examination, attitude, postures, and tends to eliminate the difference, an association between moral and physical defect, to suppress the uncionscious fear of visual contamination. The construction of a new society must be associated with the deconstruction of this complex western heritage.

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