



ALEXEY K. VINOGRADOV

ON THE DWARFISH DANCERS' FIGURINES FROM LISHT¹

A unique object of Ancient Egyptian art – and one also presenting an intriguing ethno-archeological puzzle – is the composition of four ivory figurines of dwarfish dancers found by the Metropolitan Museum of Art Expedition during the 1933/1934 season at Lisht, when working in the South Pyramid Cemetery, near the pyramid of Senwosret I. Found in the tomb of a young girl named Hepy, this composition was discovered in a disarticulated state, but consisted of an ivory platform on which four dwarfish figures stood. Three of the figures (Fig. 1) (now in the Cairo Egyptian Museum) stand on the platform and assume a unified dancing posture, their legs flexed and their arms uplifted. The fourth figure (now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York), slightly smaller than the others and originally positioned separately, has a wrinkled brow and grimacing face and stands in the same attitude as the others but with palms put together against his breast (Fig. 2). The platform itself is drilled with a series of holes, which once contained strings, which, when pulled, could make the figures move in a rotary movement, as if performing pirouettes.

Ambrose Lansing, one of the two co-authors of the MMA expedition 1933/1934 report, whose detailed comment still remains the fullest, and brightest of the rather numerous extant descriptions of the object in question, has pointed out that all four figurines (three movable and one still) once were parts of a mechanical toy. As he states, “The three larger figures perform in unison <...>”, whereas the fourth “<...> is only clapping his hands as he leads the other in the dance” (Lansing & Hayes 1934, p. 35). This artifact, he points out, recalls the well-known references to the “*dng*-dwarf of the divine dances” in the Pyramid Texts (Pyr. 1189 a), and that in the inscription in the Aswan tomb of Harkhuf, Governor of the South. The latter reports the (forthcoming ?) delivery of a *dng*-dwarf to the court of the pharaoh Neferkare (Pepi II, of Dyn. VI). He was said to have come from the mysterious “Land of the Horizon-Dwellers” – difficult to localize today, but clearly situated somewhere to the distant south of Egypt. Based on these written sources, Lansing observes:

“It is plain <...> that this dwarf was a great rarity in the Old Kingdom; he could not, therefore, have been an example of the achondroplastic variety, which seem to have been common enough in Egypt. <...>

<...> it is clear from the Har-khu-ef inscription that their habitat lay somewhere beyond the reaches of the Upper Nile. The pygmies of Central Africa immediately come to mind. Their physical characteristics as described by anthropologists resemble very closely those of our ivory figures and they are reported to be fond of dancing. It is, therefore, quite possible that in these figures we have the first representations of the Central African p<y>gmies, which until recently were considered an invention of classical writers” (Lansing & Hayes 1934, p. 34).

Underscoring the artistic uniqueness of the four ivory figurines in the Lisht mechanical toy, Lansing states:

“<...> The type of this figure and its three companions <...> is absolutely unexampled. Had they appeared in the European market without antecedents no one would have been inclined to attribute to them an Egyptian origin. At first sight they seem to be Chinese. There is a faint facial resemblance to some of the grotesque terracottas which appear in the Late Dynastic and Ptolemaic periods, but were it not for the circumstances attending their discovery it would never have been supposed that they were made in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom” (Lansing & Hayes 1934, ctp. 30).

Later scholars could hardly add much to Lansing's thoughtful considerations, and, in fact, could do no more than supplement some minor details.

¹ I am most thankful to Timothy Kendall for stylistic improvements of my text and for setting at my disposal the photograph of the main part of the mechanical toy from Lisht, now in the collection of The Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, Cairo (Fig.1). I appreciate this still more since our views on the subject differ in some points.



Fig. 1: The main part of the mechanical toy from Lisht (Ivory figurines. The Cairo Egyptian Museum. Photograph by T. Kendall).



Fig. 2: The supposed conductor of the group of dancing dwarves (Ivory figurine. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. After Duffy 1996, frontispiece).

It has become a commonplace to associate this artifact with the reference in the Harkhuf's text about the delivery of a *dnw*-dwarf "to gladden the heart of the pharaoh." The latter communication in its turn tends to be interpreted as a possible proof of the Ancient Egyptians' direct or indirect contacts with those areas of Central Africa,² in which the 19th century explorers first reported various groups of unusually small people, the so-called "Pygmies". But it is worth noting the observations of Véronique Dasen, a recognized authority in the field of Ancient Egyptian physical anthropology. In her discussion of the miniature dancers from Lisht she states:

"The physical characteristics of the figures are very unusual: they are proportionately small in size, muscular, with a slight spinal deformity and projecting buttocks; their genitals are made conspicuous, which is very rare in Egyptian statuary. The treatment of their faces, with grimacing and wrinkled foreheads, stresses their alien appearance. Yet they do not exhibit clear ethnic characteri-

2 Brunner-Traut 1958, S. 34; Hayes 1968, p. 222; Dasen 1993, pp. 132–133. The most developed discussion is that by Timothy Kendall (1988, pp. 707–711). Most puzzling looks the oxymoronical statement in the Official Catalogue of the Cairo Museum introducing the Lisht figurines as "the much coveted *pygmies of southern Africa*" (my Italics – A.V.), though actually it is based on the Harkhuf tomb's reports about his activities in the Middle Nile Valley (Saleh & Sourouzian 1987, no. 90).



stics from which we might conclude that they are pygmies and not short Egyptians. No diagnosis can be drawn from the bowing of their legs, which is due to their dancing; their flat noses could indicate a negroid origin as well as a pathological abnormality” (Dasen 1993, p. 43; ~ Dasen 1988, p. 276).

Despite her noticeable reluctance to suggest an anthropologically precise interpretation of the Lisht figurines, some observations made by the scholar herself, as it would seem, might prompt a new vision of the artifact under discussion. It will be noticed that Dasen points out:

- a) the *dwarfishness* of the dancers,
- b) the *proportionate* build of their bodies,
- c) their “*alien*” (i.e. non-Egyptian ?) look,
- d) the (unnaturally) *wrinkled* brow,
- e) the (apparently) *negroid* features of the face with a *flat* nose,
- f) the rather unusual rendering of the *genitalia*.

Now if we continue by adding some more characteristics obtained in the course of own investigations:

- g) a *light colour of the skin* of the dancers’ (due to the artisan’s use of ivory as the material from which the figurines are made),
- h) the “*Chinese-like*” *general appearance* (mentioned in Lansing’s essay, and reflecting an unprejudiced impression made by the Lisht figures),³

we eventually obtain a description in which *every* point – including the most important ones: (b),⁴ (d),⁵ (f),⁶ (h)⁷ – is reminiscent of the ethnographical descriptions of the San, the “second shortest” people in Africa, better known by the now obsolete

appellation “Bushmen” (Boschmans, Bosjesmans, etc.) given to them by the early European (Dutch) settlers at the Cape.

The present habitat of the San people (hunter-gatherers by their mode of life) in the south of the continent (principally in the areas around the semi-desert Kalahari)⁸ is a result of many prolonged historical processes, such as repeated invasions of the Bantu and of the white settlers, who pushed the “diminutive people” into the regions most unfavourable for living.

Attempts to reconstruct the San’s early habitat have long been made in the research literature, as they “are believed to have come from the region round the great lakes of equatorial Africa” (Keane 1908, p. 139; Page 1938, pp. 64–65). It was even supposed that they were in fact the “Pygmies” of the classical writers (Barrow 1801, pp. 282–283; History 1947, pp. IV, 40, 45; cf. van der Post 1918, p. 33). Among the material proofs of such a migration scholars point out the discovery of the “Bushman” rock-paintings in Tanzania and Ethiopia, and particularly the finds of the so-called “digging sticks” with “perforated stones” – a most typical multifunctional tool of the San⁹ – in Uganda and southern Sudan.¹⁰

A consideration of the unprecedentedly realistic Lisht figurines from such a perspective might give some new insights into the Ancient Egyptians’ notions about the surrounding world, the nature and the inhabitants of the neighbouring and of the distant lands.¹¹

8 Passarge 1907, S. 5–10, 21–26; Seligman 1957, p. 15.

9 Griesbach 1872, pp. cliv–clv; Joyce & Dalton 1910, p. 212, fig. 186; Fairbridge 1918, pp. 5, 9; Page 1938, p. 71.

10 Johnston 1897, p. 52; Seligman 1957, p. 15.

11 Incidentally, the “Bushman approach” to the report (presented as the original letter of the pharaoh to Harkhuf) about the delivery of the *dng*-dwarf to the presence of Pepi II might provide a clue to the otherwise difficult to explain use of the ideogram (F 21: “ear of ox ?”) in the word “*dng*-dwarf” throughout this inscription (lines/cols. 6, 7, 16, 21, 24, cf. 22). According to Dasen – one of the few scholars who have commented on this word – this term might be used merely metaphorically (??) or might imply some problems with hearing in the person mentioned (1993, p. 29). The former explanation being rather obscure, the latter seems most unlikely because the word “*dng*-dwarf” in the pharaoh’s letter under discussion refers to the person in whom a special talent of a dancer is expected by the context, which necessarily implies some musicality too. Much more suitable an alternative would seem to be the frequent enough observation in the ethnographic records stating that in a San person “<...> the lobe may be absent from the small squarish ear” (Seligman 1957, p. 16), or as this feature is described by another informant: “His ears were Pan-like, finely made and pointed” (van der Post 1918, p. 12). Cf. Passarge 1907, S. 15; Keane 1908, p. 140; Johnston 1919, p. 316.

3 “At first sight they seem to be Chinese” (Lansing & Hayes 1934, p. 30)..

4 “Bushmen are not dwarfish <...> those who live to north of Kalahari are fine well-made men”. (Johnston 1880, p. 440).

5 “They are somewhat like the Pygmies. They are little – full-grown men being from four feet to four feet six inches in stature. They are of a yellow-brown color; <...> they wrinkle early.” (Starr 1901, p. 143). Cf. van der Post 1918, p. 10: “His skin was loose <...> and incredibly wrinkled. When he laughed <...> his face broke into innumerable little folds and pleats of a most subtle and endearing criss-cross pattern”. Cf. Keane 1908, p. 143, fig. 84.

6 “Even in the deepest and most intimate source of his physical being he (the Bushman. – A.V.) was made differently from other men.<...> the men were born, lived and died with their sexual organs in a semi-erect position” (van der Post 1918, p. 12). Cf. Johnston 1919, p. 316.

7 Note the description of the Bushmen people: “The noses of all are flat on the face, rather short and dilated in the nostrils; which, taken in conjunction with the high cheek-bones, give them a strong aspect of the Chinese or Tartar countenance<...>” (History 1847, pp. 40, 41). Cf. Alexander 1838, p. 56: “<...> Chinese-looking Namaquas (Hottentot)”; Seligman 1957, p. 16.

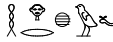


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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ein einzigartiges Objekt altägyptischer Kunst ist die Komposition von vier Elfenbeinfiguren, die zwergenhafte Tänzer darstellen und von der Expedition des Metropolitan Museum of Art während der Saison 1933/1934 in Lisht gefunden wurden. Als Teile eines einzigen mechanischen Spielzeugs betrachtet, wurden diese Figuren – seit der ersten Veröffentlichung im Jahr 1934 – gewöhnlich als die ersten ägyptischen Darstellungen der zentralafrikanischen Pygmäen interpretiert.

Bei näherer Betrachtung dieser Artefakte haben Wissenschaftler jedoch Merkmale wie die proportionale Form der Körper, die (unnatürlich) faltige Stirn, die für ägyptische Kunst eher ungewöhnliche Darstellung der Genitalien und das „chinesisch anmutende“ allgemeine Erscheinungsbild erkannt.

Solche Beobachtungen könnten darauf hindeuten, dass die in Lisht gefundenen Figuren der zwergwüchsigen Tänzer nicht die Pygmäen, sondern eher Vertreter des San-Volkes (Buschmänner) darstellen. Ihr heutiges Lebensgebiet ist die Kalahari-Wüste im südlichen Afrika, aber es gibt einige Gründe für die Annahme, dass sie in der Antike in Regionen lebten, die viel näher an Ägypten lagen.