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DWARFS IN THE OLD KINGDOM IN EGYPT

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Ancient Egyptian tombs form a rich library of information on the religious beliefs, status, official duties and the more informal activities of the owner and his family. Linked to the tomb owner's life and activities were the lives of the craftsmen, workers and servants whom he employed, and the tomb owner's desire to furnish his tomb - his 'house of eternity' - with representations of aspects of his earthly life provides us with an insight into theirs.

It is from these tombs with their grave-goods that we have evidence from the earliest times of dwarfs in this society. In drawings on pots, in the form of statues, in painted and carved wall-scenes and in texts, dwarfs appear as servants and entertainers, as skilled craftsmen and trusted retainers, and as officials and tomb owners in their own right. The earliest representations are possibly the bandy-legged figures seen on a red on buff decorated pot from Naqada dated to the mid-Prehistoric Period,¹ and the small ivory male and female figurines from the pre-dynastic sites of Naqada, Ballas and Hierakonpolis.² Skeletons of dwarfs and stelae (carved memorial stones) found within the royal tombs at Abydos and in the graves surrounding the royal burials,³ show that dwarfs were in attendance at court from the First Dynasty. Even in these early, almost schematic, depictions, many of the characteristic features of the most common type of dwarfism - achondroplasia - are present, i.e. a large head in proportion to the size of the body which is muscular and stocky; shortened and bowed limbs combined with a trunk of almost normal proportions; and a marked pelvic tilt resulting in a protruding abdomen and buttocks. Facial features are small in this type but in another, milder form, hypochondroplasia, the head and face are of normal proportions. While limbs are disproportionately shorter compared to the trunk in both these forms, another type of dwarfism is also found. Here, a growth hormone deficiency results in an adult who will be short in stature but at the same time well-proportioned, e.g. hypopituitarism.⁴ The different types can be seen in many Old Kingdom tombs and sometimes even together in the one scene, as in the row of female dwarfs attending the wife of Mereruka in his tomb at Saqqara.⁵

Although representations of dwarfs appear throughout Egyptian history from the Prehistoric to the Thirtieth Dynasty, the greatest number are found in the Old Kingdom. They appear in wall-scenes in tombs in the same conventional manner as other figures, i.e. shown with a profile view of head, hips and legs and a frontal view of the eye, shoulders and chest, although much smaller than the standard figures. In most representations they are approximately half the size of a figure of normal proportions. Their physical

deformities are accurately noted but without exaggeration or any caricaturisation. Their size does not seem to preclude them from official positions or from a variety of responsible occupations. The dwarf Khnumhotep, whose inscribed statue was found in his mastaba at Saqqara,⁶ was an Overseer of Linen, as was Redi who appears in a prominent position with the tomb owner's sons immediately behind his master, Mereri, in Mereri's spear-fishing scene (Fig. 1). Redi was also a ka-servant to his lord. In the tomb of Khentika the dwarf Ankhef holds the position of Overseer of the Household (*jmj-r pr*) and is shown presenting Khentika with a chest (Fig.2).

The imposing mastaba-tomb of the dwarf Seneb at Giza, dated to Dynasty 4 or 5,⁷ indicates that he possessed a position of standing and means in his society. The mastaba contained a fine false door and a statue of Seneb seated with his wife and children (Pl. 16). The carved panels of the false door record Seneb's administrative, priestly and honorific titles and show him engaged in the usual activities seen in contemporary officials' tombs.

In these tomb chapels and those of the relatives of the king which surround the royal burials at Giza and Saqqara, dwarfs are frequently found as attendants accompanying the tomb owner as he inspects the agricultural work or reviews the accounts of the estates which he administers (Fig. 3), or observes the activities in his workshops.⁸ They carry the personal items of their master - his staffs, sandals, a head-rest, a fly-whisk⁹ - and are shown in charge of his pets, especially dogs and monkeys. These animals are frequently found close to the tomb owner in a variety of scenes and monkeys in particular

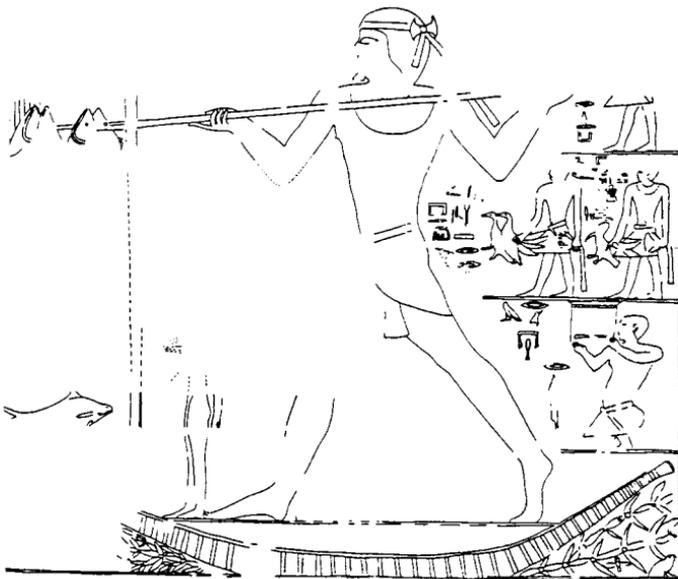


Figure 1

seem to have been allocated to the care of dwarfs (Fig. 4). Dwarfs are (surprisingly) also frequently shown leading cattle in the ceremonial presentation of these to the tomb owner (Fig. 5).

As well as accompanying the tomb owner as he supervises the work on his estates or enjoys pursuits such as spear-fishing or bird-hunting in the marshes, dwarfs take part in the entertainment organised for his amusement - dancing, singing and making music. A dwarf holding a sistrum dances with a group of female dancers in the tomb of Niuintjer (Fig. 6), another sings(?) before a flautist in Kaiaper's tomb,¹⁰ and a small statuette shows a male dwarf seated on the ground playing a harp.¹¹

Dwarfs must also have been employed in a number of minor, and perhaps often menial, positions within the household. Servant statues of dwarfs carrying sacks of linen, bowls and jars have been found in tombs, and in a wall-scene in the tomb chapel of Nefer and Ka-hay, two scribes seated writing before Nefer are accompanied by a dwarf who appears to be in charge of their equipment and was probably employed to carry it for them.¹²

Amongst the great variety of crafts and professions depicted in the workshop scenes in the officials' tombs, dwarfs feature prominently in the fashioning of jewellery. Amidst sculptors, vase-makers, carpenters and metal-workers dwarfs are generally found standing or seated on either side of tables working in pairs making the beautiful and intricate collars, pectorals and diadems worn by the nobles and their wives. All stages of their work can be seen from the preparation of the strings and the threading of the beads and drops, to the attachment of the counterpoises at the ends of the collars and the final polishing. Many of the scenes are accompanied by hieroglyphs describing the processes shown or giving the conversations of the workers. In the tomb of Wep-em-*nefert*, one of the two dwarfs preparing strings for a collar is annoyed with his companion and urges him to pay attention and pull the string tight, for the second dwarf is turning away to look at, or to talk to, another pair of dwarfs working next to them (Fig. 7).

The presence of dwarfs in the households of officials and nobles is not restricted to those residing in the capital, Memphis. The wall-scenes of the tombs of the important provincial administrators also show dwarfs in similar occupations to those seen in the tombs at Giza and Saqqara.

At El-Hawawish the dwarf Heheb is part of the entourage accompanying the palanquin of the provincial governor and Overseer of Upper Egypt, Kheni.¹³ The scene is damaged but Heheb appears to be in charge of pet monkeys, while at the same time carrying his master's sandals. Next to the tomb owner's chair in the tomb of Serfka at Sheikh Said, a dwarf is seen holding the leash of a monkey eating from a bowl of fruit (Fig. 8), while another (or the same)

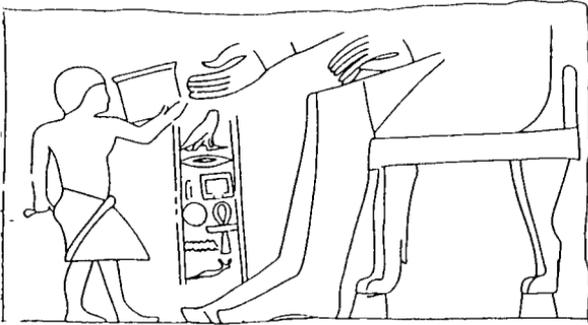


Figure 2

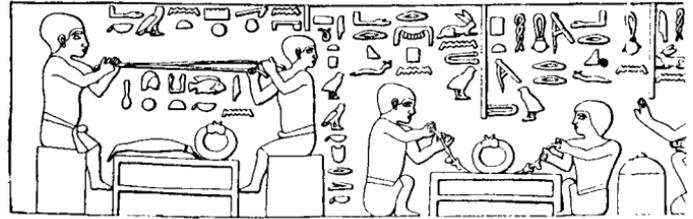


Figure 7

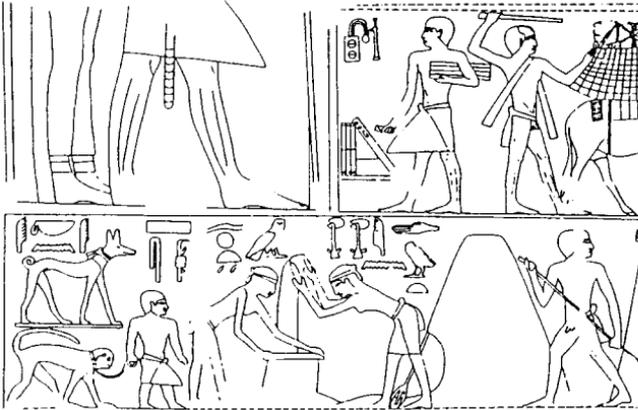


Figure 3



Figure 4

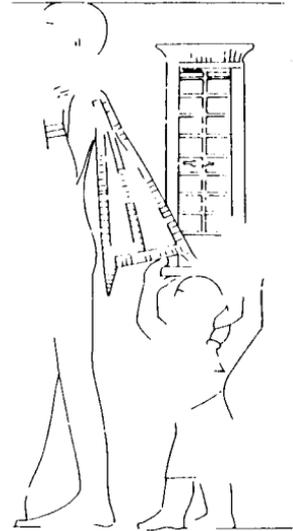


Figure 10

dwarf appears with a hound. A dwarf with a pet hound is again shown close to the tomb owner's chair at Meir,¹⁴ and at El-Hammamiya in a scene where the tomb owner, Kai-khent, is 'viewing the cattle count', a dwarf leads one of the long-horned oxen in a procession of these animals (Fig. 5). A more unusual depiction is seen in the tomb of Iby at Deir el-Gebrawi where a dwarf next to the chair of the tomb owner holds a mirror and stands beside a box with two mirrors shown above it (Fig. 9).

And, as so frequently seen in the tombs at Giza and Saqqara, dwarf jewellers are amongst the craftsmen in the workshop scenes in the tombs of the provincial officials at Deshasheh, Sheikh Said, Deir el-Gebrawi and Zawyet el-Maiytin. While it has been suggested that the craftsmen remain anonymous and far removed from their patrons, at Deshasheh one of these dwarfs, carrying a finished collar in one hand and a box containing other pieces on his head, is actually presenting his work to the tomb owner, Inty. In the same tomb another dwarf appears in a unique position.¹⁵ Here, amid scenes of animal husbandry, bird-netting and boat-building, a dwarf is shown standing in the stern of a fishing-boat. While some of the crew row and others hold the end of a large fishing net, the dwarf steadies himself with one hand on the head of the oarsman before him and holds aloft a loop of rope in his other hand. His task is unclear but this loop of rope is often seen in the hands of boatswains(?) in boat scenes and may have been used for signalling.

One final and unusual example of dwarfs in provincial households comes from El-Hagarsa, the western cemetery of the Akhmim province. Here, in the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Ka-em-nofert, a female dwarf is one of a line of women attendants of normal size. While they are shown carrying a box, a harp and a linen container the dwarf bears an unusual shrinelike chest on her head. The scene had been copied and published by W. M. F. Petrie in 1908,¹⁶ but since that time the wall where the dwarf appears has partly fallen away. Petrie's record has therefore been of great importance in supplying information now lost to us, but careful study of the scene by the Macquarie University expedition to the site in 1989-90 has provided some details not shown in Petrie's copy and thus complements the earlier record (Fig. 10).

Male dwarfs appear to be frequently found in the households of high officials but female dwarfs are very rarely depicted. Not unexpectedly the few examples show them to be part of the entourage in a woman's tomb, or attending the wife of a tomb owner: e.g. in the mastaba-tombs of the queens Nebet and Queen Merysankh III,¹⁷ and in the wife's chapel in the tomb of the vizier, Mereruka (see n.5).

Two hieroglyphic words, *dn̄g/d3ng*  and *nmw/nmj* , usually designate dwarfs.¹⁸ The first term is found in the Pyramid texts of the Old Kingdom, and in the letter sent to the expedition leader Harkhuf from

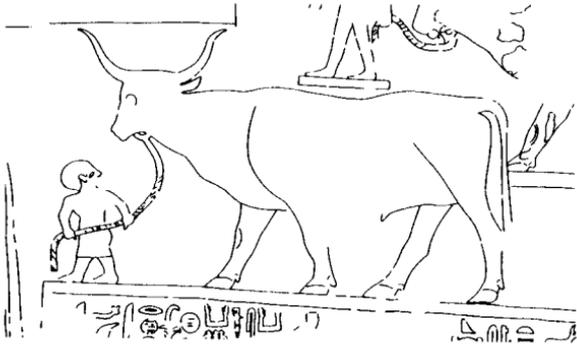


Figure 5

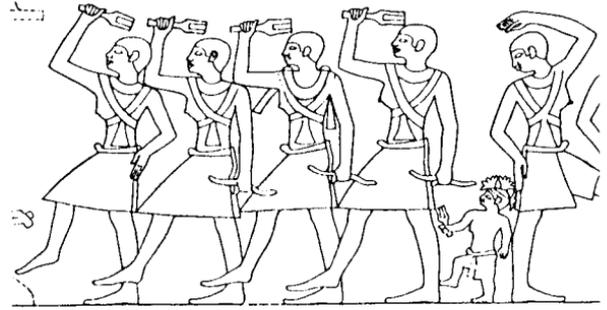
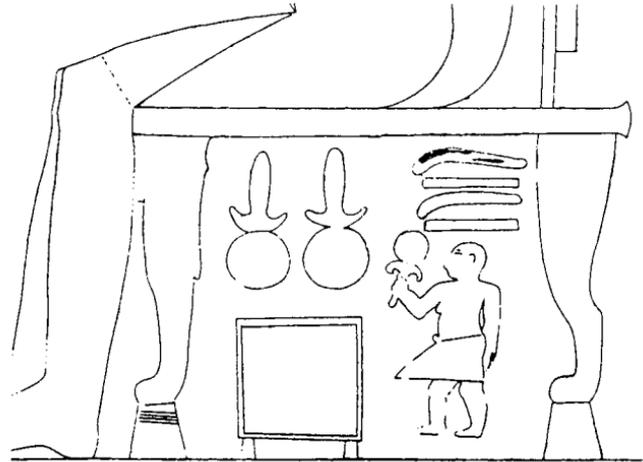
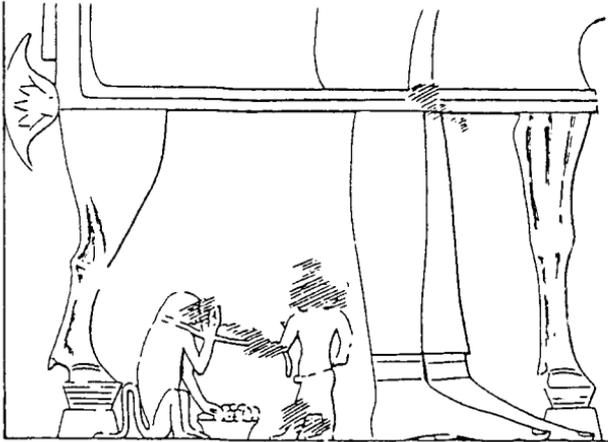


Figure 6



Pepy II which Harkhuf had inscribed at the entrance to his tomb at Aswan.¹⁹ The letter is in reply to Harkhuf's report that he was returning from the country of Yam bringing to the king, amongst precious and exotic products or tribute, a *dng*. The young king urges Harkhuf to take the utmost care over the *dng* who was to perform 'dances of the god'. Reference is made in the letter to a similar small man brought back from Punt to the king, Isesi, in the previous century. The delight of Pepy II, his detailed orders over the safe passage of the *dng*, together with the reference to the earlier *dng* from Punt, emphasise the rarity of this small man. This rarity, combined with the task of the *dng* to 'dance for the god', appears to set these small people apart from the dwarfs who appear frequently in tomb scenes. For these reasons many scholars consider the *dng* to be African pygmies. The second term, *nmw/nmj*, is used from the Middle Kingdom to the Late Period with clear reference to achondroplastic dwarfs.

From the numerous representations in the tombs of the Old Kingdom cemeteries at Memphis and in the provinces, dwarfs appear to have been useful and even valued members of their society. There is no evidence of derision or amusement at their expense, rather to the contrary. In the statue group of the official Seneb and his family for example, the figures appear to be deliberately arranged so that they are both aesthetically pleasing and sympathetic to the dwarf. Seneb is seated next to his wife with his short legs crossed on the seat, and in the space before him where the legs of a tomb owner of normal proportions would be found, the sculptor has placed the two standing children of Seneb (Pl. 16). It is interesting to note also that in Old Kingdom scenes the names and titles of the dwarfs are often given above their figures but they are never referred to as 'the dwarf, X'. Part of this respect may have arisen out of a belief that these small people had some magical power. Amulets in the shape of achondroplastic dwarfs are known from the earliest periods and the god Ptah also assumes this dwarf form from the time of the Middle Kingdom in protective amulets possibly worn by children.

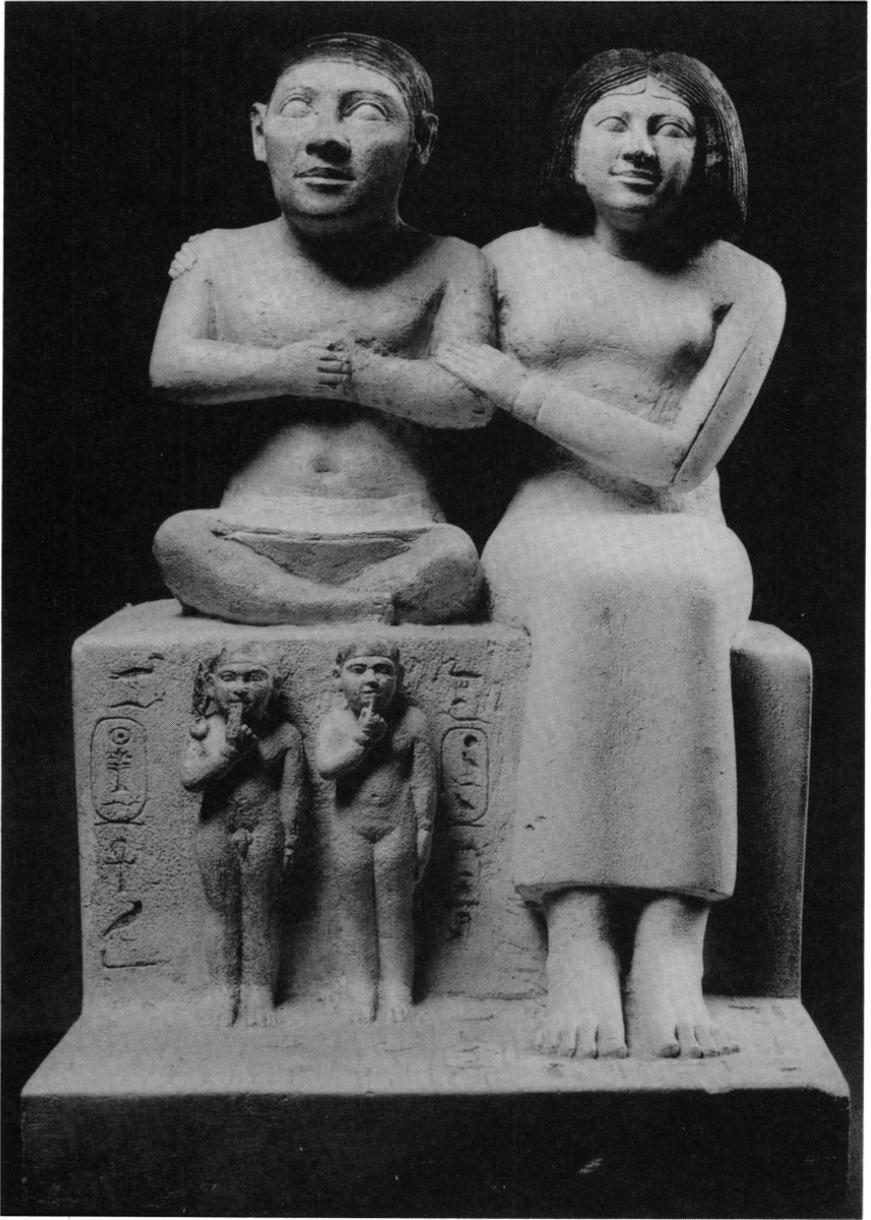
Further discoveries of archaeological evidence of dwarfs such as the uncovering in January 1990 of the mastaba of another dwarf, Per-en-ankh, near the tomb of Seneb at Giza,²⁰ will continue to add to our present knowledge of the place these special people had in ancient Egyptian society.

Illustrations

- Fig. 1 W. V. Davies et al., *Saqqâra Tombs 1: The Mastabas of Mereri and Wernu* (London, 1984), pls. 5, 8.
- Fig. 2 T. G. H. James, *The Mastaba of Khentika Called Ikhekhi* (London, 1953), pl. 31.
- Fig. 3 B. van der Walle, *La chapelle funéraire de Neferirtenef* (Brussels, 1978), pl. 12.

- Fig. 4 A. Badawy, *The Tomb of Nyhetep-Ptah at Giza and the Tomb of 'Ankhm'ahor at Saqqara* (Berkeley, 1978), fig. 33.
- Fig. 5 A. El-Khouli and N. Kanawati, *The Old Kingdom Tombs of El-Hammamiya* (Sydney, 1990), pl. 45.
- Fig. 6 H. Junker, *Giza X* (Vienna, 1951), fig. 44.
- Fig. 7 S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza I* (Oxford, 1932), fig. 219.
- Fig. 8 N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of Sheikh Said* (London, 1901), fig. 4.
- Fig. 9 N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of Deir el-Gebrâwi I* (London, 1902), pl. 17.
- Fig. 10 N. Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of El-Hagarsa* (to be published by A.C.E.).

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- 1 J. E. Quibell, *Catalogue of Archaic Objects in the Cairo Museum* (Cairo, 1904-5), pl. 22.
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- 6 L. Borchardt, *Statuen und Statuetten von Königen und Privatleuten I* (Cat. Gén. du Musée du Caire; Berlin, 1911), pl. 144.
- 7 H. Junker, *Giza V* (Vienna, 1941), pp. 3-126.
- 8 E.g. S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza I* (Oxford, 1932), fig. 219.
- 9 E.g. Junker, *Giza III* (Vienna, 1938), pl. 27.
- 10 H. G. Fischer, "A Scribe of the Army in a Saqqara Mastaba of the early Fifth Dynasty" in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 18 (1959), fig. 8.
- 11 J. H. Breasted, *Egyptian Servant Statues* (Washington, 1948), pl. 81.
- 12 A. M. Moussa and H. Altenmuller, *The Tomb of Nefer and Ka-hay* (Mainz/Rhein, 1971), pl. 24a.
- 13 N. Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish II* (Sydney, 1981), fig. 21
- 14 A. M. Blackman and M. Apted, *The Rock Tombs of Meir V* (London, 1953), pl. 19.
- 15 W. M. F. Petrie, *Deshasheh* (London, 1898), pls. 13, 5 respectively.
- 16 W. M. F. Petrie, *Athribis* (London, 1908), pl. 1.
- 17 Z. Y. Saad, "A Preliminary Report on the Excavations at Saqqara 1939-1940" in *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 40 (Cairo, 1940), pl. 79; W. K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Kawab, Khafkhufu I and II* (Boston, 1978), fig. 72.
- 18 A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache V*, p. 470; vol. II, p. 266, respectively.
- 19 See translation in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I* (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 23-27.
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The Dwarf Seneb and his family. The Egyptian Museum Cairo (JdE 51280)