

CHAPTER 29

A WORLD WITHOUT PLAY?

Children in Ancient Egyptian Art and Iconography

NICOLA HARRINGTON

ANCIENT Egyptian art was a medium for communication: it expressed social status, religious affiliations and beliefs, wealth, power, aspirations, and desires. In a culture where art was essentially functional, it is perhaps unsurprising that children and the process of growing up are rarely the main focus of iconographical compositions. In the same way that the dead do not bury themselves, Egyptian children do not seem to have drawn themselves, and what remains is largely the product of male artisans working for society's privileged minority. The contexts in which children are shown are primarily mortuary and religious in nature, reflecting both the concerns of the elite and the overwhelmingly tomb-based nature of the evidence.

A review of secondary literature on ancient Egypt may give the impression that children had little part to play in society and that the young were notable mostly in death due to the high infant mortality rate (Lucy 2005: 44). While some scholars have considered burial types (Janot 2002, 2003; Speiser 2008; Tristant 2012) and presented overviews of childhood in antiquity (most recently Marshall 2013), an explicit analysis of children in Egyptian art of the pharaonic period (c.3100–30 BC) has been lacking (cf. Feucht 1995). The main reasons for this are largely twofold: the interests of academics and the limitations of extant sources. Ancient texts rarely mention pre-pubescent individuals and then only in very general terms, and formal iconography can be ambiguous. Contextualizing Egyptian art requires a consideration of its function and intended audience: it dictates how literally an image may be interpreted, as well as the importance of what is included (and thus what is excluded, cf. Brockliss and Montgomery 2013: 72).

IDENTIFYING CHILDREN IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

In her analysis of the representation of youth in Greek art, Lesley Beaumont (2012: 25) suggests six categories of iconographical criteria with which to identify children: (1) size, height and bodily forms, (2) hair length and the presence of facial and body hair, (3) dress, (4) gestures, (5) attributes, and (6) the compositional relationship of figures. These markers are equally applicable to images of Egyptian juveniles who may be identified by their height relative to other figures, gestures, (particularly forefinger-to-mouth), clothing (or lack thereof), and hairstyle. The sex of juveniles is not marked, other than obvious biological differences, and skin colour (usually red for males and yellow for females), until around puberty when distinctive clothing and wigs are worn. Iconographic conventions changed over time: young children in the Old and New Kingdoms (c.2575–2134 BC; c.1550–1070 BC) were usually depicted nude, whereas those of the Middle Kingdom (c.2040–1640 BC) are generally shown clothed (Luiselli 2015: 643). Garments discovered during archaeological excavations indicate that, in most cases, nudity was intended as a means of identifying juveniles, and was not necessarily a reflection of everyday reality (Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 125). The relative sizes and proportions of children from the Old Kingdom onwards were often anatomically unrealistic, with children being essentially portrayed as small and naked miniature adults. However, during the reign of Akhenaten (c.1391–1353 BC), when the focus of royal and religious iconography shifted from rulers interacting with a pantheon of gods to a focus on representations of the king and his immediate family beneath the sun disc, more lifelike body shapes and gestures appeared in art. Juveniles (and other adults, depending on the context) were still regularly depicted on an unrealistically small scale in relation to (elite) adults, conforming to the iconographic hierarchy wherein the most powerful individuals were depicted on a much larger scale than those around them (e.g. Davies 1906: pl. VI; Foster 1999: 106, fig. 70; Freed 1999: 119, fig. 81). The immediate aftermath of the death of one of Akhenaten's daughters, apparently in childbirth, was marked with unique tomb reliefs (Martin 1989: pls. 58, 63, 68). The latter is highly unusual: to create art in ancient Egypt was to produce an image or object with the potential to contain life, and this influenced the contexts in which certain images could be represented; for example, the birth and death of animals may be shown in tomb scenes, but never that of humans.

While it is not possible to assign exact chronological ages to the children depicted in Egyptian art, the boundary between pre- and post-pubescent individuals is quite clearly marked. For boys, the transition to adulthood is marked chiefly by the wearing of a short kilt: facial and pubic hair are not shown. In contrast, female puberty is indicated by a shorter and more complex hairstyle compared with adult women, as well as the depiction of breasts and pubic hair. The motif of the nude adolescent girl is found on toilette items associated with female grooming (including cosmetic spoons, jars, and

mirror handles: Derricks 2001), statuettes, faience bowls, and ostraca (boating in the marshes: Vandier d'Abbadie 1959: pls. CLIV, CLV), as well as in banquet scenes (Figure 29.1). This imagery is sex-specific, having no male parallel, and the aesthetically pleasing nature of the artefacts on which girls are depicted may be a deliberate visual link between young females and the goddess Hathor. In the roles of dancers, musicians (particularly lutists, e.g. TT 52, Shedid and Seidel 1996: 52), and attendants at feasts for the dead, these girls invoked the presence of the deity for the benefit of the deceased in whose tombs such images could be found. Hathor was the mistress of music, dancing, harpists, garlands, and incense (Schott 1950: 78, 1952: 77–8), all of which are represented at banquets in which pubescent girls (often nude, wearing only jewellery and a hip girdle) serve women, and young (clothed) men are depicted assisting adult male guests



FIGURE 29.1 Wooden mirror handle in the form of a nude pubescent girl holding a kitten. Mirrors and cats were associated with the goddess Hathor. Provenance unknown. Eighteenth Dynasty (c.1550–1307 BC). Berlin (Germany) 16400. Photograph by Nicola Harrington.

(Davies 1963: pl. VI; Robins 1999: 65, fig. 4, 66, fig. 5). This gender segregation was a feature of many—but not all—New Kingdom mortuary banquet scenes.

The most common hairstyle for children of both sexes from approximately three years of age (post-weaning) until adolescence was the single lock of hair of varying lengths on an otherwise shaved scalp or over short hair as the child aged. These ‘sidelocks’, along with nudity, and the finger-to-mouth gesture, are used to identify young mortals and child-gods alike, including Horus (as Horus-the-child, later Harpocrates). As children matured, the sidelock was allowed to grow, until by the time puberty was reached it was cut (Figure 29.2). Priests, in contrast to other elite males, often shaved their faces and heads as part of their purification rituals (Robins 1999: 57–8). Mortuary (*sem*) priests are depicted with a plaited sidelock over their natural hair indicative of their junior position in relation to the deceased: they act as the god Horus on behalf of the dead person who



FIGURE 29.2 Nebnefret, daughter of the tomb owner, wearing a sidelock with arms raised in adoration of the sun god and other deities. Tomb of Pashedu (TT 3) at Deir el-Medina, Thebes (Egypt). Nineteenth Dynasty (c.1307–1196 BC). Photograph by Nicola Harrington.

is identified as his father Osiris, ruler of the underworld. Thus, the wearing of a hairstyle associated with childhood is synonymous with subordinate status. The baldness of most other priests may reflect the purity associated with neonates and infants, such as those depicted nursing and laying on beds in birth bower scenes.

Once married, couples were expected to have children, and concern for fulfilling this social requirement is demonstrated, for example, by the production of fertility figurines. It is also mentioned in letters to the dead and didactic texts (such as the *Instruction of Any*, Lichtheim 1976: 136), and indicated by the presentation of votives in the shape of male and female genitalia to deities at shrines, such as those dedicated to the goddess Hathor at Deir el-Bahri (Pinch 1993: pl. 52). ‘Bed’ or ‘fertility’ figurines, iconographically linked to ‘birth bower’ ostraca, show nude, supine women lying on beds and sometimes wearing mounds of unguent on full wigs (Pinch 1983). Several of these incorporate the figure of a painted or modelled newborn beside the mother (e.g. Capel 1996: 66–7), and their function may have been to ensure safe delivery and the survival of the neonate. ‘Birth bower’ ostraca depict post-partum women seated on a bed or stool beneath a canopy entwined with vines while receiving mirrors, kohl tubes, and drinking vessels from other females, some of whom are pre-pubescent while others are clearly defined as adults based on dress and hairstyle (Brunner-Traut 1955). The infant lies on the bed or is cradled in his or her mother’s arms (Vandier D’Abbadie 1937: pls. L, LII). Figures of the protective god Bes, as well as monkeys and dancing children (often identified as foreign due to their dark skin and ‘Nubian’ hairstyles; Vandier D’Abbadie 1959: pl. CXX), create a simultaneous sense of joy and liminality, of danger not yet averted for mother or child.

Egyptian infants, in contrast to Classical Greek ones (e.g. Boardman 1985: fig. 53), are not depicted crawling or learning to walk in two-dimensional art. I am only aware of a couple examples of figurines of crawling children (naked and with sidelocks) dating prior to the Ptolemaic Period: Swansea W 291 and Petrie Museum UC 16613, both from the Middle Kingdom (see also Petrie 1927: pl. 51.370). Infants are shown held against their mothers’ chests in tomb scenes from the Old Kingdom, often supported by linen bands, leaving the women’s hands free for work, such as cooking or picking fruit. Images and statuettes of nursing occur (e.g. Moussa and Altermüller 1977: pl. 26a), but it is more common to find goddesses breastfeeding kings than mortal women nursing babies (but see TT 336: Bruyère 1926: 87, fig. 57) (Figure 29.3). The status of women (and their husbands or fathers) could be elevated if they became royal wet nurses, hence their depiction in private tombs with princes seated on their laps complete with royal regalia (e.g. TT 93: Roehrig 1996: 18, fig. 9; TT 85: Hawass 2009: 119; Ockinga and Binder 2013: 510–11, 513).

Ancient Egyptians used iconographic conventions to suggest life stages, though the rituals that probably accompanied these milestones have left little trace (for a discussion of terminology and life stages see Harrington 2018). The discovery of mud balls in tombs and houses containing infantile hair, supports the theory that children underwent rites of passage (Tassie 1996: 60; Robins 1999: 56). The lack of other archaeological, iconographical, or textual evidence may be a result of the rules of decorum (Baines 2007), contextual irrelevance, or simply an accident of preservation. Elite Egyptians



FIGURE 29.3 Limestone statuette of a woman in the process of breastfeeding, with another infant behind her. Probably from the tomb of Nikauinpu, Giza (Egypt). Fifth Dynasty (c.2465–2323 BC). MMA 26.7.1405. © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (USA).

had a well-developed sense of ‘self’ versus ‘other’, as can be seen in the way in which foreign children are depicted. ‘Asiatic’ children are coloured yellow regardless of sex, have elongated limbs and are carried on men’s shoulders or in unnatural poses, whereas Nubian and slave women carry their infants in slings or baskets on their backs (e.g. TT 78: Brack and Brack 1980: pl. 87). In other examples, non-Egyptian offspring are led along by the wrists, sometimes turning to look up and back at adults as if to emphasize their dependence on them (e.g. TT 100: Hawass 2009: 121).

Figured ostraca, along with tomb scenes, mortuary and votive stelae, and to a lesser extent, funerary and votive cloths, faience bowls, statues, and statuettes, provide insights into the otherwise virtually invisible worlds of children and childhood in ancient Egypt. The ostraca—line drawings or paintings on limestone flakes or pot sherds—were found in the 1930s in great quantities during excavations of the New Kingdom artisans’ village of Deir el-Medina in Thebes (Vandier d’Abbadie 1937–46). Their importance lies chiefly in the fact that much of what is depicted on them is not found anywhere else in Egyptian art. While the audience and function of tomb scenes, stelae, and statuary are fairly clear, that of figured ostraca is much less certain, partly because we do not know where or how they were displayed (if they were intended for display in the first place); the fact

that many were discarded in the Great Pit suggests that any religious or secular significance was likely to have been short-lived. Along with drafts of tomb scene details and other practice pieces are images of children at work, ‘birth bower’ (post-partum) scenes, and at least one example of an apprentice’s attempt at copying cartouches (Janssen and Janssen 1990: 87, fig. 33). Scenes from private tombs and figured ostraca reveal that children had ‘agency’ (see James 2009; Katajala-Peltomaa and Vuolanto 2011: 93): an element of control over their environments and productive roles in the communities in which they lived. They were not passive observers, but participants in a complex and hierarchical structure, and they presumably understood their place within it.

WORK AND PLAY: CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

Ethnographic studies have shown that involvement in domestic chores and agricultural work are an integral part of growing up in many cultures, particularly where formal education is lacking. The expectation that children would support their parents is made explicit in didactic texts (e.g. *Instruction of Any*, Lichtheim 1976: 141), and their involvement in activities such as caring for younger siblings is found in iconography, particularly funerary scenes. Here, girls are shown among the adult female mourners often with infants tied to their torsos with slings (e.g. TT 57: Malek and Miles 1989; TT 49: Feucht 1995: 348, fig. 25; *Book of the Dead of Pakherer*, Schneider 1999: 124). Their youth is indicated by hairstyles, nudity, and relative height. It would appear from these scenes that as soon as toddlers were able to stand unaided, they took part in the funerary procession and mimicked the gestures of women (e.g. TT 44: Harrington 2013: 40, fig. 15), but once boys reached puberty, they joined men and exhibited more controlled gestures of grief (e.g. TT 341: Hawass 2009: 172). Tomb scenes and votive stelae show that juveniles took part in religious festivals, worship of local and state gods, and ritual activities with their families from an early age; they are shown dancing, playing musical instruments to accompany processions, and carrying offerings, often in the company of women and older siblings (Figure 29.4) (e.g. Davies 1903: pl. ix, 1933: pl. xviii; Pinch 1993: fig. 10 b; for textual references see Wente 1990: 77, 179). Religious traditions were an important part of the transmission of social practices and identity: juveniles were socialized through their involvement in the practices of their kin and community: ‘Children were allowed and encouraged – and even expected – to participate in the lived religion of the communities and, occasionally, even to influence its outcome’ (Katajala-Peltomaa and Vuolanto 2011: 88).

In searching for ‘invisible’ children in the material record, archaeologists often identify ‘toys’—frequently miniatures—in the expectation that play is an integral part of childhood. While miniatures may be indicative of learning through imitative games, Lillehammer (1989: 98–100) cautions that small objects may be utilitarian things for use by smaller people rather than ‘toys’ (see also Kohut 2011: 158). The Yucatec Mayans, comparable with the Egyptians in their agricultural subsistence and domestic life, construct childhoods wherein children learn to care for livestock, wash clothes, tend



FIGURE 29.4 Painted linen funerary cloth showing a young boy named Penpare who had been taken by his mother (Iy) to make offerings to his deceased grandmother (Isetneferet). Probably from Thebes (Egypt). Nineteenth Dynasty (c.1307–1196 BC). BM EA 65347. © Trustees of the British Museum (London, England).

gardens, prepare meals, and work in the fields, through observation and participation from their second year onwards. Their make-believe play is limited, and usually involves re-enactments of adult work (Berk 2006: 265). Iconographical evidence of play in ancient Egypt is equally lacking. On figured ostraca, children are depicted wrestling (e.g. Marshall 2013: pl. XXXVI, fig. 58), though whether this constitutes play, sport, military training, or a combination of these is not clear (cf. Janssen and Janssen 1990: 140, fig. 48a). Faience balls and ‘dolls’ are usually cited as proof of toys and therefore games (e.g. Zillhardt 2009: 32–4; cf. Marshall 2013: 147 ff; Harlow 2013), but if play did constitute a significant facet of childhood development, it seems not to have warranted any form of pictorial or written record.

Evidence for children at work is easier to find. From the Old Kingdom, they are shown attending markets with their mothers or older sisters (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: fig. 10), catching birds (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: pl. 22), and accompanying men on fishing expeditions (e.g. Milward 1982: 145, cat. 144), following the model of learning through observation followed by participation. Figured ostraca reveal that young children were responsible for pot-making (Peterson 1973: pl. 38, fig. 64) and burnishing (Figure 29.5). The manufacture of ceramics is usually considered to be the responsibility of men, but figured ostraca, along with a New Kingdom limestone figurine of a woman finishing a vessel (UC 15706: Roehrig 1996: 15, fig. 4), indicate that



FIGURE 29.5 Limestone ostracon depicting two young boys working on a large ceramic jar. The image is unusual in that it seems to show the older child teaching the younger one how to use a stone to burnish the surface: the action is indicated by the child having two left arms while his or her right hand steadies the pot. From Deir el-Medina (Egypt). Twentieth Dynasty (c.1150 BC). Berlin 21444. Sketch by Nicola Harrington after a photograph in Geßler-Löhr, Schmitz, and Seidel (1978: 56, cat. 11).

women and children were also involved in pottery production. Children's other occupations included domestic chores, such as fire tending, oven stoking, learning to grind grain (e.g. Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: pl. 23), and weaving; the latter is not attested in art, but it must have occurred. Non-royal tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c.1550–1307 BC) are known for their 'daily life' scenes that relate to the tomb owner's career and the provisioning of his mortuary cult. Agricultural landscapes in which the seasonal cycles are depicted, from cultivating and sowing to harvesting and winnowing, often include young children: boys scatter seed behind the plough and chase birds away from harvested grain, while girls collect ears of corn and gather flax for processing into linen (e.g. Elkab no. 3: Tylor and Griffith 1894: pl. 3; TT 52: Shedid and Seidel 1996: 34, 35; TT 69: Hawass 2009: 141; TT 217: Marshall 2013: pl. XLIV, 70). Girls were also tasked with delivering water or beer to field labourers and are represented in three dimensions carrying large amphorae that were used as containers for perfumed fat (Freed 1982: 204, cat. 238).

Figured ostraca present another role for young children: animal husbandry. Boys holding sticks and with rope slung over their shoulders are depicted driving herds of cattle along the riverbank, and leading, feeding, or sitting with bulls or pigs, as well as chasing off antelope grazing on acacia trees (Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: pl. IX, 2062, pl. XII, 2072, pl. XXX, 2192). Children, predominantly young males, are shown training baboons to climb date palms in order to gather fruit (e.g. Marshall 2013: pl. XLVIII, figs 76, 77): the boys hold a rope tied around the baboon's torso in one hand and a stick in the other. The inferior status of children is suggested by the fact that Nubians, both adults and juveniles, are also depicted with baboons (e.g. Vandier d'Abbadie 1936: pl. V, cf. pl. VIII). Letters from the village of Deir el-Medina reveal that children, again usually male, were sent to deliver messages (e.g. Wente 1990: 118, 123, 125, 127), and ostraca depicting children on horseback (or on donkeys or cattle) suggest that these were not always delivered on foot.¹ The oft-cited notion that such ostraca depict the goddess Astarte (e.g. Holden 1982: 305, cat. 417) is not well supported. Some figures carry sticks, but there are no clear iconographic markers that might identify any of them as deities. Gender is also difficult to determine; cephalic hair is often gathered into the standard three 'bunches', and plain necklaces as well as heart pendants are worn by the riders, the same as those seen on children of both sexes in secular contexts.

In Egyptian art, apparently unambiguous representations may be more complex than they seem. For example, the craftsman Ptahneferty was probably an adult when he commissioned a sculpture for his tomb, yet it depicts him as a young boy (Brovarski 1988: 89); and on the stela of Qen his son, Huy is depicted as a naked child, despite a title that indicates he worked alongside his father in the Valley of the Kings or inherited his role.² Not all stelae were commissioned, and less affluent individuals may have received stock images that were inaccurate representations of their family in terms of numbers and ages. The scene of fishing and fowling, common in private tombs from the Old Kingdom onwards, and often subsumed into the category of 'daily life', is a symbolic and idealized rendering of the successful passage into the next world. By the Eighteenth Dynasty, this scene was considered so important to the tomb owner's afterlife existence that children were in some cases fabricated to provide the outward appearance of a balanced nuclear family (Shedid and Seidel 1996: 60–1). Although the tomb of Nakht (Theban Tomb 52) is extensively damaged, it would appear from remaining scenes and inscriptions that Nakht was infertile; the only son mentioned in an offering/banquet scene is that of his wife, presumably a child from a previous marriage (Shedid and Seidel 1996: 46). Unsurprisingly, the children in Nakht's fishing and fowling scene are unnamed, but in mimicking their 'father's' actions, the young boy and girl suggest that Nakht's influence will be inherited and his legacy will remain on earth.

The women who stand behind Nakht are usually identified as his wife in duplicate, but analysis of the hairstyles and the fact that one woman cradles a nestling in her hand indicate that they are his daughters, who on rare occasions take precedence over sons in tomb scenes (Whale 1989: 257; cf. Manniche 1988: pl. 1, fig. 1). Egyptians used several terms for non-adults including 'fledgling' (MacDonald 1994: 57), and texts refer to children 'in the egg' (*in utero*). The hieroglyph for egg was used from the Middle Kingdom

as a way of expressing filiation (Gardiner 1957: 474, H8), the Middle Kingdom *Dialogue of a Man with his Ba* refers to children ‘crushed in the egg’ (Parkinson 1997: 157), and in medical texts Horus the Child is said to be ‘in the nest’ (e.g. Leitz 1999: 72), a reference not only to his falcon form, but also his vulnerability. This association of children with birds may explain why they are shown holding them (usually pintail ducks, lapwings, or hoopoes) in the presence of adults. This iconographic connection appears to have been borrowed by the Greeks who also chose the handheld bird as a symbol of youth and lost childhood on grave stelae (Beaumont 2012: 191).

CHILDREN IN MORTUARY CONTEXTS

Only men who received sufficient incomes could afford the expense of commissioning tombs and related monuments, as well as setting up cults, complete with personnel, to cater for them and their family members after death. Girls and boys might be commemorated as part of the decorative scheme of a burial chamber or on a stela, but their representation would not directly assist in the afterlife existence of the tomb owner (unlike his wife or mother), so their inclusion was not guaranteed. Non-adults are depicted as deceased, seated, and receiving mortuary offerings alongside their parents, in at least 30 tombs in the Theban necropolis (Whale 1989: 254). In the Nineteenth Dynasty (c.1307–1196 BC), when the emphasis of tomb decoration shifted from ‘daily life’ scenes to interaction with the gods in the next life, children are shown greeting deities in the company of their parents, including Re-Horakhty, Atum, Khepri, and Ptah (e.g. TT 3: Zivie 1979: pl. 15; TT 218: Feucht 1995: 365, fig. 31). If young children were included in family groups only when they were buried in the tomb itself (Dorman 2003: 36), then it may explain why few are commemorated on tomb walls. In private tombs and on mortuary stelae, children are depicted under (or beside) the chairs of their parents, symbolically situated in the West, the abode of the dead: they face offering bearers, including other children, who arrive from the east (the land of the living) (Figure 29.6). Juveniles who were not otherwise incorporated in the tomb may have featured on stelae, which were set up as memorials for the dead and as interfaces for contact with the living. A few stelae show children as the main recipients of cult. On one example, a boy named Merysekhmet is depicted (Robins 1995: 83) holding a blue water lily bouquet—symbolic of rebirth—and seated on his mother’s lap in front of a table of offerings, suggesting that he was treated as an adult after his death (cf. the stela of Dedusobek and his daughter: Bianchi 1996: 70).

Children were buried in a variety of ways throughout Egyptian history, from interment in rectangular wooden coffins, amphorae, and fish baskets, to being wrapped in rags and reed mats, or simply placed directly into pits in the ground. Factors affecting burial type included the child’s age, the era, and parental circumstances (Zillhardt 2009). Painted anthropomorphic coffins for pre-pubescents are comparatively rare (Lacovara 1988: 160, cat. 112; Speiser 2008: 523–32). One Nineteenth Dynasty example,



FIGURE 29.6 Young girl holding a bowl of food seated beneath/beside her mother's chair. Detail from the mortuary stela of Ramose. From Thebes (Egypt). Nineteenth Dynasty (c.1307–1196 BC). Florence 2522. Photograph by Nicola Harrington.

probably from the tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina (TT 1), is that of a girl named Tairtsekheru who, given the size of the coffin, was probably around four years of age when she died. The wooden coffin is professionally painted and depicts the girl as an adult, with jewellery, full wig, fine linen dress, and sandals (Figure 29.7). The inscriptions on the coffin provide her name and that of her mother: Tairtsekheru is identified as 'the Osiris' and is said to be 'true of voice', standard epithets of the dead. Funeral processions depicted on the walls of private tombs show that wakes were an occasion not just of mourning, but also an opportunity for the ostentatious display of material wealth. Thus, highly decorated coffins, such as Tairtsekheru's, indicate the importance of the child and the expectation that such children will share in the same afterlife existence as their elite parents, while simultaneously emphasizing the high social status of the bereaved family.

Separate statues of children are uncommon; instead, juveniles were included in group statues with their parents and siblings (Wildung and Schoske 1984: 100, cat. 44, 136–7, cat. 63; Kampp 1996: pl. XIVb; Russmann 2005: 40–2, cat. 19). Children are generally shown in a passive manner with their feet together, sometimes holding onto the leg of an adult, indicative of the way in which their identity is entwined with that of their parents, and of their reliance on them. In the active striding posture, infants hold their fingers to



FIGURE 29.7 Painted wooden coffin of Tairtsekheru depicting a young girl as an adult. From Thebes (Egypt). Nineteenth Dynasty (c.1307–1196 BC). Edinburgh A1887.597. Courtesy of National Museums Scotland.

their mouths in a self-comforting gesture evocative of the uncertainty and vulnerability of childhood (Figure 29.8). From the Old Kingdom onwards, children may be seen in formal offering scenes reaching towards or attempting to interact with their deceased parents. The statue-like adults, often the recipients of mortuary cult in these contexts, rarely respond (e.g. Feucht 1995: 430, fig. 47), as if to emphasize the difference and distance between the living and the dead.

CONCLUSION

According to Ariès (1962: 33) 'Medieval art until about the twelfth century did not know childhood or did not attempt to portray it'. In contrast, it is clear from depictions of children in ancient Egyptian art that childhood, in terms of stages of physical growth and development, was marked even if only in a cursory way. Male pubescence, as represented by the growth of bodily hair, and infancy, as depicted by crawling and learning to walk, are among the life stages that do not seem to have been deemed sufficiently relevant for



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FIGURE 29.8 Limestone statuette of Kherednefer. His son is shown in the finger-to-mouth pose and with the red skin colouring typical of males. From Thebes (Egypt). Eighteenth Dynasty (c.1550–1307 BC). BM EA 2293. © Trustees of the British Museum (London, England).

depiction. This may be a result of the purposes of Egyptian art, cultural constraints, and the experience of childhood in the ancient world. Each generation of children had to be trained in social skills and traditions, and prepared for their role in life whether domestic or priestly, as a child of the royal school or in the unpredictable, persecuted life of a slave.

While the selectiveness of ancient sources may mean that we cannot reconstruct an accurate or comprehensive picture of the experience of childhood in ancient Egypt, figured ostraca and other imagery at least provide insights into the contribution children made to the economy and to family life in antiquity. The lived reality of youth is accessible at least insofar as it was relevant to the medium, intended audience, or the context in which images were displayed. If we take depictions of juveniles as representative of (elite

male) society's view of them, then children were considered to be productive members of the community, active participants in religious events, and worthy of remembrance after death.

NOTES

1. Stockholm MM 14057: <http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-mhm/web/object/3918611>
2. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/549536?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=Qen&pos=1>

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