

VÉRONIQUE DASEN

## ‘ALL CHILDREN ARE DWARFS’. MEDICAL DISCOURSE AND ICONOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN’S BODIES

*Summary. Ancient medical discourse conveys a mainly negative view of children’s bodies. From Hippocrates to Galen, newborn children are defined as imperfect and ugly beings, associating an excessive softness and weakness with various anomalies. Aristotle links their physical disproportions with those of dwarfs and animals. These disproportions induce physiological troubles and mental incapacities. Hot-tempered and moist, children are dominated by their emotions and sensations. Often authors group them with other beings regarded as inferior, such as women, the old, the sick, the insane, the drunk. How are mythical and human children rendered in iconography? Do their characteristics correspond to the medical discourse? The image of children’s bodies changes with the passing of time; the miniature adult of archaic Greece gradually turns into the plump toddler of the Hellenistic period. How can we interpret these transformations? Does the evolution of iconography reflect the transformation of society or does it mirror the progress of medical knowledge?*

The question of the relationship between popular beliefs and ancient medical theories has been a continuing source of reflections (cf. Lloyd 1983) which I would like to pursue by exploring the iconography of children in Classical vase-painting. These pictures have until now received little attention from medical historians, though they offer unsuspected insights into collective imagery and its possible influence on life sciences. I will thus investigate the relation between iconography and ancient medical views with a focus on Aristotle’s biological treatises. I will not include children of all ages, but I will concentrate on early childhood, up to three years, an age which seems to have represented a transition time within the first hebdomad.

For physiological reasons first: at three, the child is definitely weaned, he is able to talk, it is also a time of increased physical activity. His bones are believed to have hardened enough so that he can be freely let to walk, and to leave home to play outside. The turning point is also socio-religious. In Classical Athens, the three-year-old child was involved for the first time in the religious life of the community. He took part in the festival of the Anthesteria. A series of miniature wine jugs, painted with pictures of children, seem to be related to events taking place on the second day of the festival, the *Choes* (van Hoorn 1951; Neils in Neils and Oakley 2003, 145–7; Dasen 2005b).

Greek vocabulary does not confirm this subdivision, as it does not provide an age-specific terminology. *Teknon*, *paidion*, *paidarion*, *pais*, and other words are variously used by ancient authors to designate different age categories or different types of relation (Golden 1990, 12–22). This flexibility echoes that observed in Roman society (Rawson 2003, 134–45) and may similarly reflect interest in the child's development as well as the notion that his progressive integration into the community life is marked by steps, but without imposing rigid ones.

#### ANCIENT MEDICAL DEFINITIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

Few medical texts mention small children, but, from Hippocrates to Galen, all define babies and toddlers as forming a special category of beings with a specific morphology and physiology, distinct from that of adults (Bertier 1996; Hummel 1999; Mudry 2004). These characteristics are on the whole negative. Newborn babies are generally described as imperfect, weak and ugly beings. Imperfect because humans are born incomplete: 'They are born in a more imperfect condition than any other perfected animal', says Aristotle (*Gen. An.* 5.1.779a24; see also 778b21). Ugly, because they have a red face, little hair (*On colours* 6.797b24–30), because of the lack of food which provoked the birthing process, and poor eyesight, indicated by the blue colour of their eyes (*Gen. An.* 5.1.779a–80b).

Various authors compare the softness and malleability of the baby's body with wax (e.g. Galen, *De temperamentis* 2.2 = Kühn 1.578). To prevent deformations in the legs, swaddling was recommended as soon as possible after birth (cf. Aristot., *Hist. An.* 7.4.584b3–5). Plato, in his *Laws* (7.789e), asserts that swaddling should last for two years, and that the nurse should carry children until the age of three. Others are more prone to free the child soon; Soranos explains that swaddling may stop after 40 days, depending on the child's constitution (*Gynaecia* 2.15).

Symbolically, the function of swaddling is very important. As the erect stance defines Mankind, swaddling transforms a small shrivelled animal into a human and helps it grow as straight as possible (Plut., *Mor.* 3D). One could even try to shape and improve this plastic body by massage, an aesthetic work detailed by Soranos, and evoked in the hippocratic treatise *On Regimen* (1.19 = L. VI.492–3): 'Curriers stretch, rub, comb and wash. Children are tended the same way'.<sup>1</sup>

During the first 40 days nurslings were also believed to be partly deprived of sensations (Aristot., *Gen. An.* 5.1.778b; 779a). For a week, before the loss of its dried umbilical cord, a newborn child 'is more like a plant than an animal', says Plutarch (*Mor.* 288C). The vegetal metaphor is translated by a mineral one in the iconography of Kronos' myth, who ate his children as soon as they were born. On a pelike in New York, Rhea presents Kronos a stone wrapped in swaddlings as if it were a child (Neils and Oakley 2003, 87, 205–6, cat. 4). The success of the substitution demonstrates the alleged insensitivity and inertia of the baby, accentuated by his enforced immobilization. Like the practice, belonging to the 'longue durée', the scene is repeated on a Roman altar of the second century AD (Schefold and Jung 1981, 26–7, fig. 17).

When the baby has passed the first 40 critical days, he emerges as the opposite, a fierce, hot-tempered being, dominated by emotions and sensations. Moist and hotter than adults, the

1 This treatment was long-lived. On swaddling and massage of the baby in Rome: Gourevitch 1995; Holman 1997; Hanson 2003; Gourevitch *et al.* 2003, 155–77, 185–9; Coulon 2004, 43–7, 66–8. In modern times: Lett and Morel 2002, 215–16; Rollet and Morel 2000, 203–31. On child's care, see also the bibliographies by Dasen *et al.* 2001, and by Dasen and Ducaté-Paarmann 2004.

baby is also greedier and angrier than men. ‘Of all wild things, the child is the most unmanageable’, says Plato (*Laws* 7.808D). Some authors recommend coddling to prevent the infant from crying (*Laws* 7.792A), others, less permissive, consider crying as a natural form of exercise (Aristot., *Pol.* 7.17.1336a; Hanson 2003).

For Aristotle, children’s characteristics associate them with different categories of human beings regarded as inferior compared to his standard, the adult male (Golden 1990, 6–7; Coles 1997), such as old people, who are physically weaker, with a poorer memory and less hair (cf. Plat., *Laws* 1.646A), with the insane and the drunk (*On things heard* 801b5–9; *Probl.* 30.14.957a43), with a similar unpredictable, irritable temperament, and disorderly behaviour, with women, irrational, changeable and weak (*Gen. An.* 5.3.784 a4–5), and lastly with dwarfs.

In the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle asserts: ‘In man, the size of the trunk is proportionate to the lower portions, and as a man grows up it becomes much smaller in proportion. In infancy the reverse is found: the upper portion is large and the lower is small (. . .). In other words, all children are dwarfs (νόνοι γάρ εἰσι τὰ παῖδια πάντα)’ (4.10.686b6–9; 11). Most likely he refers to the most common type of short-stature, achondroplasia, a growth disorder inducing a disproportionate body, characterized by a normal-sized trunk with a large head and short bent limbs.

He states the meaning of the term ‘dwarfish’, which he applies to all animals: ‘Compared with man, all the other animals are dwarf-like. By “dwarf-like” I mean to denote that which is big at the top (big in the trunk or the portion from the head to the residual vent), and small where the weight is supported and where locomotion is effected’ (686b3–5).

This comparison is very important, because Aristotle uses physical disproportions to account for a range of somatic and psychic differences between children and adults (cf. Coles 1997, 307–10). First, disproportions associate infants with animals. The heavy upper part explains why children move like quadrupeds, says Aristotle: ‘That is why infants cannot walk but crawl about, and at the very beginning cannot even crawl, but remain where they are’ (686b8–11). Second, they induce mental incapacities. The heaviness of a large head impairs the impulses of thoughts, which are therefore erratic. In particular, children’s memory, like dwarfs’, is bad. ‘Dwarfish people and those who have large upper extremities have poorer memories than their opposites, because they carry a great weight on their organ of perception, and their impulses cannot, from the first, keep their direction, but are scattered, and do not easily travel in a straight course in their recollecting’ (*On memory and recollection* 453b).

Like dwarfs, children also need more sleep than normal-sized adults: ‘Generally speaking (. . .), dwarfish or big-headed types are addicted to sleep’ (*On sleep and waking* 457a). 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 (see also *Gen. An.* 5.1.779a21–3). The author of the *Problemata* (883a) adds that persons with ill-proportioned bodies are more easily affected by fatigue because it is not equally distributed in their limbs.

Sleep has a special meaning for newborn children: it indicates their transition state, between living and not living: ‘(. . .) the transition from not being to being is effected through the intermediate state, and sleep would appear to be by its nature a state of this sort, being as it were a borderland between living and not living: a person who is asleep would appear to be neither completely non-existent nor completely existent’ (Aristot., *Gen. An.* 5.1.778b28; see also 779a19–20).

I will not investigate further these notions of anatomy and physiology. What must be stressed is that infants are characterized as beings of a special, lower category, physically

weak, mentally incapable, with uncontrolled appetites. For Aristotle, they are marked with physical disproportions which explain their intellectual and psychic inferiority and associate them with inferior beings, such as animals, and with abnormal beings, such as dwarfs.

It must be noted that the comparison with dwarfs is not entirely negative. Aristotle says that dwarfs' intellectual deficiencies are counterbalanced by other qualities, but only vaguely described by the term δύνανται: 'Even among humans beings, children, when compared with adults, and dwarf adults, when compared with others, may have some characteristics (δύνανται), in which they are superior, but in intelligence, νοῦν, at any rate, they are inferior' (*Part. An.* 686b23–7).

Aristotle's recurrent comparison between dwarfs and children is unexpected, because we know how low the occurrence of this type of growth disturbance is (c.1 in 34,000 live births). Observing a dwarf, however, was certainly possible. The disorders appear during infancy only, when the time allowed for exposure of abnormal newborns was past, but they must have been very rare (Dasen 1993, 205–10).

Is Aristotle's insistence due to the need of logic, because the case fits with his system, or is the comparison taken over from a more ancient collective imagery, reflected in Classical iconography, which in turn influenced medical and biological conceptions?

#### ICONOGRAPHY

Iconographic representations of young children in sixth and fifth century vase-painting convey a specific image of children's bodies. The conventions changed drastically between the Archaic and the Classical period. In the sixth century, the infant is depicted as a miniature adult (Rühfel 1984; Vollkommer 2000). He may be easily confused with a slave, also conventionally depicted smaller and naked to show his lower social status; only the context, such as standing close to his mother, allows us to identify a child. In that period, the baby is best characterized by the fact that he is held in the arms of a woman or a man, a convention which evokes Plato's recommendation that a child be carried until the age of three. The anatomy of children is not yet distinctive. They have the proportions and facial features of adults. On a terracotta pinax from the acropolis at Athens, Aphrodite is holding Eros and Himeros. The children's pose is very stiff; nothing evokes softness or weakness except the fact that they are cradled in the arms of the goddess (Dasen 2005a, 216–17, fig. 152).

A few variants are found. Another terracotta pinax from Athens (560 BC) depicts a girl seated behind her mother, observing her working. She must still be small, because she is seated on the ground, but again her position is very stiff (Rühfel 1984, 20–1, fig. 8). Depictions of crawling or squatting children appear only in the course of the fifth century. In the archaic period, age differentiation is thus very hard to determine. When no size difference is visible, we may assume that the children are twins (Dasen 2005a, figs. 150–4).

#### *The emergence of the muscular and chubby baby*

Significant changes take place gradually in the Classical period. We see first the emergence of representations of mythological children, such as Herakles, in the first half of the fifth century. Then appear daily life scenes with mortal children which predominate in the second half of the fifth century, especially on miniature wine jugs, mass-produced between 425–390 BC



Figure 1  
a Stamnos, Paris, Louvre G 192. Author's drawing.  
b Lekythos, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum V 320 (c.470 BC). Author's drawing.

which may have been offered to three-year-old toddlers at the festival of the Anthesteria. A naturalistic child figure type appears, with marked attention to the rendering of infantile anatomy, such as plumpness, behaviour, such as crawling, and attributes, such as toys and amulets (Rühfel 1984; Beaumont 2003). The interests of the painters, however, vary between the beginning and the end of the fifth century, and stress different bodily characteristics.

The iconographic type of baby Herakles, which appears around 480 BC, offers a long-lasting model of an athletic child, born to survive. An attic stamnos in the Louvre depicts the oldest representation of baby Herakles (Fig. 1a; c.480 BC). The scene shows the first exploit of Herakles aged about eight months according to the texts, wrestling with the snakes sent by Hera to kill him (Woodford 1988, cat. 1650; Dasen 2005a, 67–8, fig. 15 a–b). His strong and muscular body contrasts with the frail one of his twin brother Iphicles. The picture is attributed to the Berlin Painter, an artist famous for his skilfull rendering of anatomies, who, not surprisingly, was also unchallenged by the rendering of a childish body. But he did not attempt to render infantile disproportions, such as an oversized head. The image of the infant Herakles wrestling the snakes soon became very popular. We find it occurring alone in various media, such as coins (Woodford 1983). The continuing success of the motif until Late Antiquity certainly reflects the everlasting anxiety about losing young children. The snakes metaphorically refer to the high mortality of early childhood attributed to child-killing demons, always female, who haunt western – and eastern – folklore (Dasen 2005a, 62–82). But Hellenistic and Roman artists did not always manage to produce a figure combining successfully the fragility of the child, indicated by his sitting or kneeling position, and the strength of the hero (Woodford 1988, cat. 1600, 1624, pls. 552, 553).

The creation of the image of baby Herakles around 480 BC may be associated with two events. One is literary: the composition of the first Nemean ode by Pindar with a description of the story; the other is political: the Persian wars. In times of conflicts, the survival of children, especially males, becomes a very important topic. A similar phenomenon is observed at the end



Figure 2  
Cup, Brussels, Musées Royaux, A 890. Author's drawing.

of the fifth century at the time of the Peloponnesian wars, with the production of another type of child-centred iconography (Ham 1999).

Soon after 480 BC, the image of Herakles influenced representations of mortal babies in daily life scenes. On a lekythos in Oxford in the manner of the Pistoxenos Painter (Fig. 1b), the baby boy looks like a miniature body-builder with strikingly developed pectorals (Rühfel 1984, 29, fig. 15; Neils and Oakley 2003, 67–8, fig. 7). His attitude stresses his vigour. His attention is attracted to the right, and his mother must hold his arm strongly. An inscription above his head probably describes him as the pride of his parents: 'Glaukos, son of Leagros, is beautiful'.

The change from the athletic Herakles type to a more childish type is attributed to the famous late fifth century painter Zeuxis, who, according to Pliny (*Nat.* 35.64), was criticized for making the head and the limbs of the hero too large. Infantile disproportionate figures appear earlier in vase-painting, in the second quarter of the fifth century. Babies and toddlers are characterized by chubby limbs, a large head and a convex torso, often associated with a new crawling pose (Fig. 4a–c). The crawling position does not imply that the child does not know how to walk, but serves as an age indicator. It denotes the weakness and plasticity of the body of the very young (Sourvinou-Inwood 1988, 48–50), especially when the painter does not know how to render correctly the proportions of a baby (e.g. Van Hoorn 1951, cat. 510, fig. 209).

### *Satyrs and dwarfs*

New facial features also characterize children in the second half of the fifth century. On the tondo of a kylix cup by the Sotades Painter in Bruxelles (c.460 BC), a squirming child is seated on a ceramic potty chair, the legs protruding from an opening of the bowl (Fig. 2). A well-dressed woman, most likely the mother, faces the infant. The child has a plump body,





Figure 3

Chous, Dresden, Albertinum, ZV 1827. After Dasen 1993, pl. 49.2 (G 14).

contrasting with the slim arms of the mother. He also exhibits distinct facial features: a high bulging forehead and a snub-nose which evoke the features of dwarfs (Fig. 7). The similarity is stressed by the common physical disproportions between their large heads and the fullness of their short limbs.

These plump babies seem to illustrate the theory of Aristotle on the dwarfishness of children, but they are clearly characterized as infants. Babies often wear amulets hanging on a string across their chest (*crepundia*) and bracelets around the wrists and ankles to protect them against the evil eye (Fig. 4a) (Dasen 2003). Toddlers have childish interests, such as pushing a toy cart or playing with an animal (Fig. 4a–c). Some may have occupations unusual for their age, like the young athletes boxing on a chous in Boston (Rühfel 1984, 147, fig. 83), but no sign of physical maturity indicates that they are pathologically short adults.

Occasionally the attributes of children and dwarfs blend. Only additional features such as a beard, side-whiskers, a moustache, a balding head, and mature sexual organs betray an adult age and let us identify a dwarf. Like children, dwarfs may thus be depicted on miniature choes. On the Dresden chous (Fig. 3) (Dasen 1993, cat. G 14, pl. 49.2), a small man has a thin, proportionate body, but with a beard and adult sexual organs, which reveal his greater age; the painter may have chosen to picture him on this kind of jug to stress his resemblance to a child. Like children, dwarfs are close to women. On a pelike in Agrigento, a naked dwarf follows a woman dressed in a chiton and a long cloak, balancing on his head a basket, as maids normally do (Dasen 1993, cat. G 6, pl. 45). On a cup in Athens, another dwarf stands in the bedroom of a woman seated on a chair (Dasen 1993, cat. G 13, pl. 49, 1). Dwarfs may also wear amulets, like the plump bearded dancers in Yale (Dasen 1993, cat. G 22, pl. 54). One of them seems to have

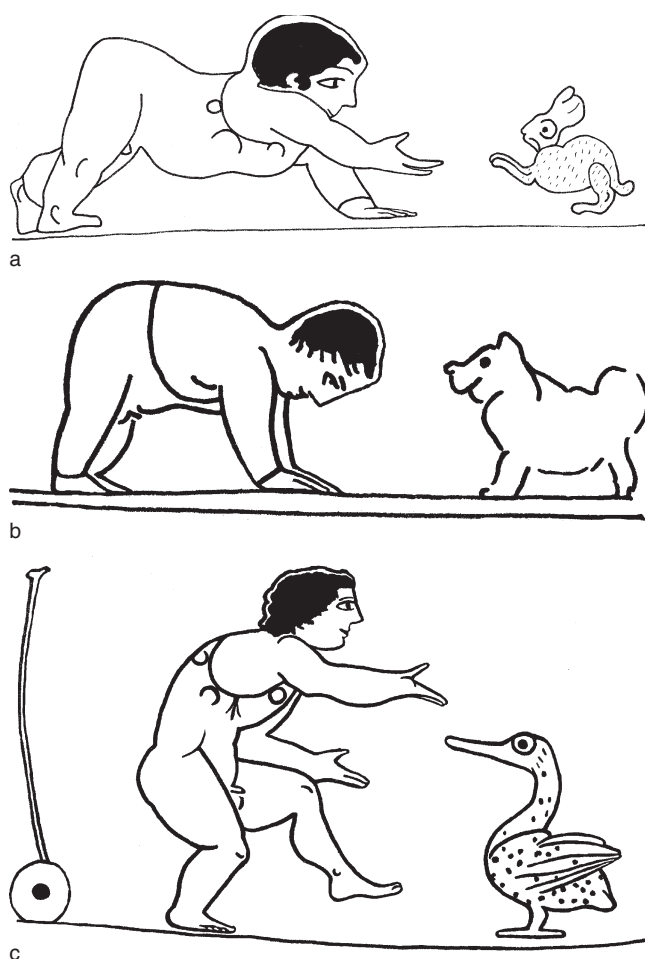


Figure 4

a Chous, Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum 6254, ex coll. Schrader. Author's drawing.

b Chous, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 1973. Author's drawing.

c Chous, Corinth Museum MP113. Author's drawing.

a fillet across his chest. If this is not an ivy garland, it could be some kind of *crepundia*, perhaps to stress the affinities of dwarfs and children.

The ambiguity of infants and dwarfs is very meaningful. We find it also in neighbouring cultures, especially in Egypt where childish deities such as Horus-the-child and Ptah-Pataikoi are explicitly described or depicted as dwarfs. In the Ptolemaic temple of Horus at Edfu (third century BC), a text describes the birth of the divine child thus: 'A lotus emerged in which there was a beautiful child who illuminated the earth with rays of light, a bud in which was a dwarf (*nmw*) whom Shu liked to see' (Dasen 1993, 48–50). The sun-god Horus is identified with dwarfs because of their ambiguous physical appearance, infantile and mature at the same time, and like the rising sun, old and newly born at the same time. Amuletic figurines of dwarfish Ptah-Pataikoi,



protector of the foetus and of young children, were widely exported in the Mediterranean world in the first millennium (Dasen 2005b). This kind of representation certainly influenced Greek iconography. The squatting posture of children comes from Egypt, derived from the hieroglyphic sign for child in the form of Horus-the-child (Hadzisteliou Price 1969).

In Greece, the association of children with dwarfs implied comparing them with satyrs. Like children, satyrs are characterized by a snub-nose and a bulging forehead (Fig. 6). These common physical features designate their similar nature, energetic, with uncontrolled appetites, and close to animals (cf. Ps. Aristot., *Physiognomics* 811b). A large series of pictures show children behaving wildly, full of vitality, squirming, reaching out both hands (Fig. 2). On a chous in London an animated baby waves a club-shaped rattle (Neils and Oakley 2003, 239–40, cat. 41). This animated child evokes the wild temperament described by Aristotle who praises the invention of the rattle, attributed to Archytas, ‘a good invention, which people give to children in order that while occupied with this they may not break any of the furniture; for young things cannot keep still’ (*Pol.* 8.6.1340.25–8). Other pictures allude to childish greediness. On a chous in Erlangen, a woman lifts a boy stretching out both hands towards grapes (Van Hoorn 1951, fig. 251; Rühfel 1984, fig. 98). Similarly, the baby on the red-figure hydria of the circle of Polygnotos in Cambridge reaches out his arms because he is hungry and is waiting for the nurse to feeding (Neils and Oakley 2003, 221, 230, cat. 29).

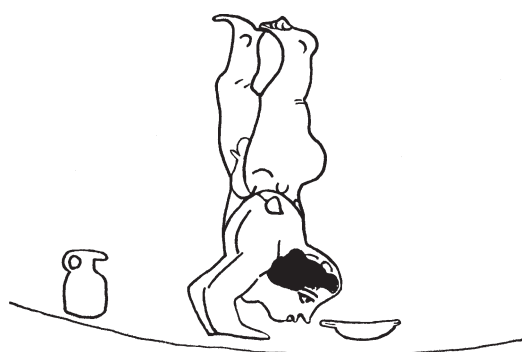
Children’s crawling demonstrates their animality as it associates them with quadrupeds. Boys may crawl to a rabbit (Fig. 4a; e.g. Van Hoorn 1951, figs. 340–41), to a Maltese dog (Van Hoorn 1951, fig. 504), or many mimic the animal (Van Hoorn 1951, fig. 439). Often the painter places the child and his pet on the same level by using a symmetrical composition which makes them visually equal (Fig. 4b). The boy engaged in a dialogue with a water bird (Fig. 4c; e.g. Van Hoorn 1951, figs. 355–6) reminds us that birds, like children, are bipeds that are unable to stand erect (Aristot., *Part. An.* 695a; cf. Lloyd 1983, 41; Coles 1997).

Crawling is also characteristic of satyrs (Lissarrague 1988, 336) who may be placed in a symmetrical composition with animals, especially on askoi. Crawling also associates children and satyrs with the drunk who lost control, as on a cup in Berlin (Durand *et al.* 1984, fig. 170). Boys may also mimic the poses of adult comasts, performing unbridled caprioles, throwing their legs up in the air (Fig. 5a; see also Rühfel 1984, figs. 71, 7388) as do satyrs (Fig. 5b; Durand *et al.* 1984, fig. 171), and dwarfs (Fig. 5c; Dasen 1993, cat. G 20, pl. 53.2).

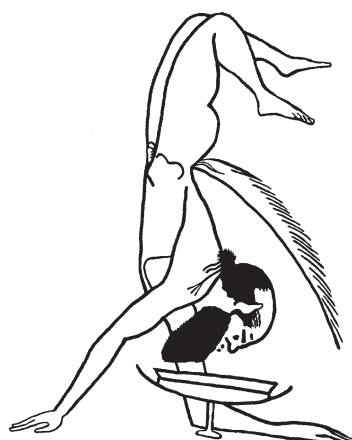
On choes, we also find young satyrs substituting for boys, and, like them riding animals adapted to their size (fawn: van Hoorn 1951, fig. 310; calf: Lissarrague 1988, fig. 4). Some satyrs are already bald or bearded, but crowned with flowers like children (van Hoorn 1951, figs. 1–2; Rühfel 1984, fig. 94). In a few examples, a miniature satyr behaves like a child, dancing on the back or jumping in the arms of his father (Fig. 6; Dasen 1993, pl. 40, 2) – or are these dwarf satyrs?

## TO SUM UP

By comparing children to dwarfs, Aristotle appealed to a more ancient and popular imagery. He took over a theme well attested in iconography, associating children with dwarfs, and dwarfs with satyrs. By comparing children and animals, he also responded to the preoccupation of an anthropocentric society. Many myths deal with the question of man’s place in nature, and put him at the top of its hierarchy, some using the figures of childish dwarfs, as in the myth of Pygmies, who are not depicted like miniature humans in the fifth



a



b



c

Figure 5

a Chous, Athens, National Museum 14527. Author's drawing.

b Psykter, London, British Museum E 768. Author's drawing.

c Cup, Todi, Museo Civico, 471. Author's drawing.

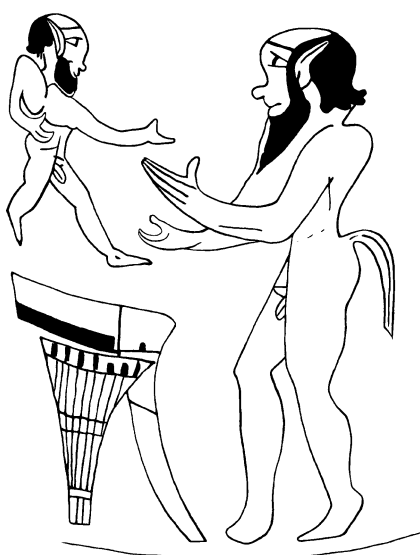


Figure 6  
Lekythos, Boston MFA 000351. Author's drawing.



Figure 7  
Amphora, Brussels, Musées Royaux, R 302. After Dasen 1993, pl. 65.1 (G 70).

century, but mingle the proportions of achondroplastic dwarfs and of children (Fig. 7; Ballabriga 1981).

The emergence of a naturalistic image of children in the fifth century is often associated with the progress of anatomical knowledge. This notion of progress, however, is questionable. A closer study of the pictures reveals a number of long-lasting folk beliefs which marked ancient notions about small children.

Two main models influence infants' depictions in the fifth century: the first one refers to baby Herakles, an athletic infant, who provides the model of the child born to survive. As a snake-killer, he refers 'en creux' to the high mortality of the very young, a fear also alluded to by the constant depiction of different types of amulets on toddlers' bodies, often very plump, not to say overweight, which corresponds to another long-lasting misconception of children's health ('beau bébé, gros bébé') (Lett and Morel 2002, 213–4; Rollet and Morel 2000, 113–6). The second model is composed of unusual beings, similarly disproportionate, like dwarfs, and similarly uncontrolled and misbehaved, the satyrs.

In common, both models, Herakles and dwarfs – satyrs, place children in an ambiguous relation to animals which is also expressed by Aristotle. Representations of children with a large bird become a genre in Hellenistic and Roman art (cf. Neils and Oakley 2003) translating the proximity of children and animals, and evoking two fights, the vain one of the never mature population of Pygmies, and the victorious one of the child-hero Herakles.

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Département des Sciences de l'Antiquité  
Rue Pierre-Aeby 16  
CH 1700 Fribourg  
SWITZERLAND  
E-mail: veronique.dasen@unifr.ch

#### TRANSLATIONS

When not otherwise mentioned, translations are cited after the Loeb edition.

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