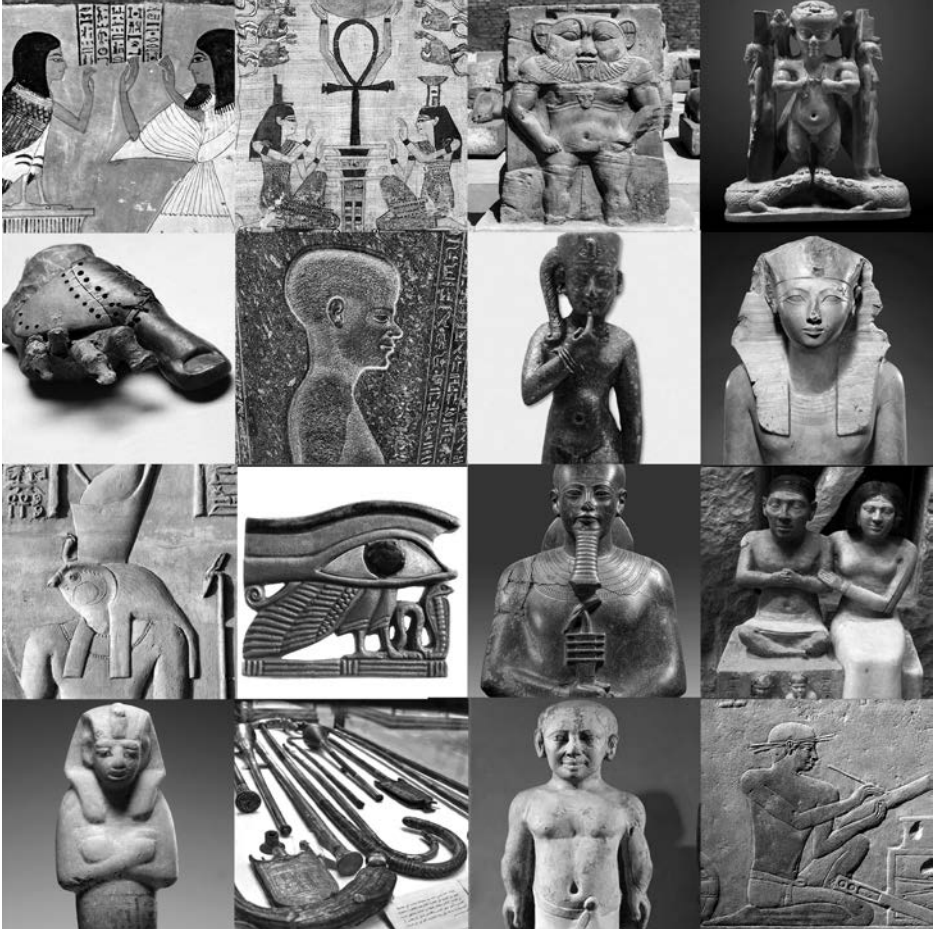


ANCIENT EGYPT & DISABILITY



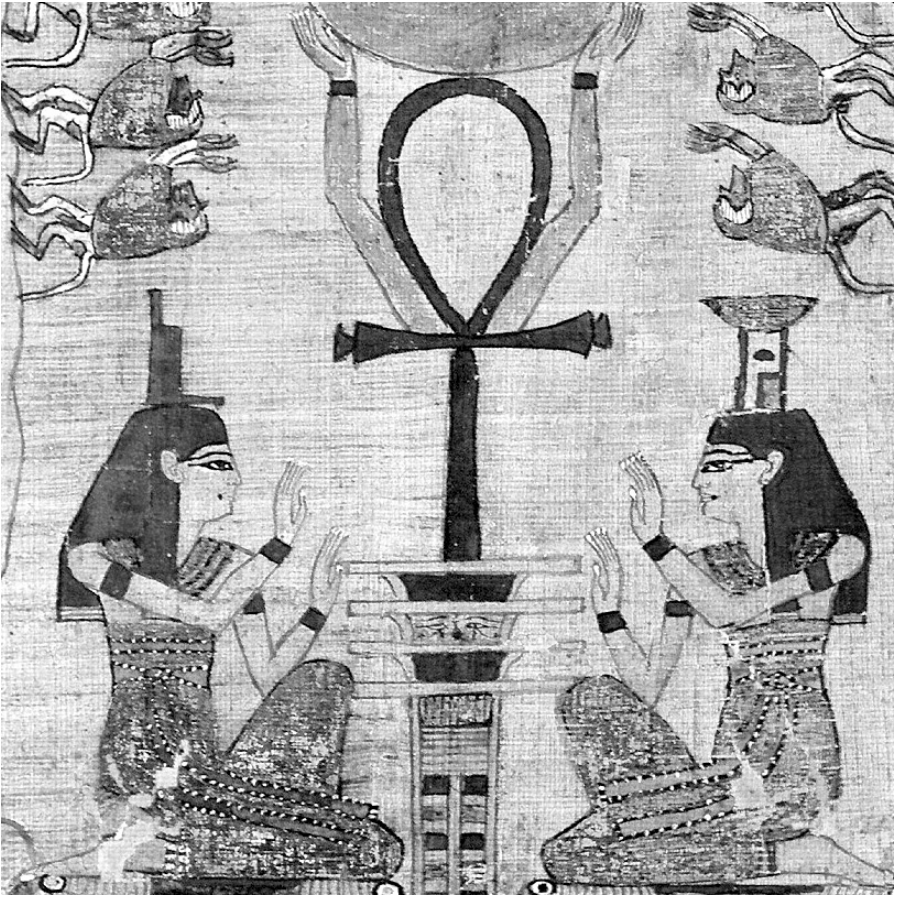
Disability Action Research Collective
Featuring work by Alexandra Morris, Richard Amm,
and Kyle Lewis Jordan

Ancient Egyptian society was more accepting and inclusive of disability than many contemporary societies. Disabled people were integrated into the community, working alongside non-disabled people as scribes, musicians, craftsmen, or labourers. They sometimes held titles as high as pharaoh (king) and were well represented in high positions within royal courts. Disabled people were also featured in art and texts and even within the pantheon of the gods. Including the god Ptah, who Egypt is named after, and Horus who represents the power of the pharaoh.

Disabilities in ancient Egypt were often seen as divine attributes bestowed by the gods. This belief system contributed to a relatively accepting attitude towards people with disabilities. The idea of duality permeated and influenced all of ancient Egyptian culture including disability. The duality of order vs chaos was central to their beliefs, order had to be maintained through a struggle against chaos. Disabled people were seen as a natural expression of the universe itself, and killing them was seen as risking unbalancing the natural order. There is evidence of a range of impairments in ancient Egypt including dwarfism, blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, lower limb impairments, and amputations as well as mental illnesses.

This zine has a gender bias, men had more power in ancient Egypt, and so were more likely to be represented in the historical record. Due to the nature of surviving evidence, physical impairments are more commonly represented than other types of disability. Additionally, since this zine covers ancient history, dates are an estimate that cover the most likely time range for the material covered, rather than an exact date. This zine contains images of human remains.

Disabled people have been a part of every society and civilisation. It is easy to assume that the prejudice and exclusion that defines disability in our current culture has always existed, but there have been a broad range of conceptualisations of disability. Ancient Egypt was a culture that lasted for thousands of years and how it treated its disabled citizens is remarkably different to how many people imagine disability in the ancient past. While technology and healthcare have progressed, how society treats and thinks about disabled people today is significantly less advanced than it was thousands of years ago.

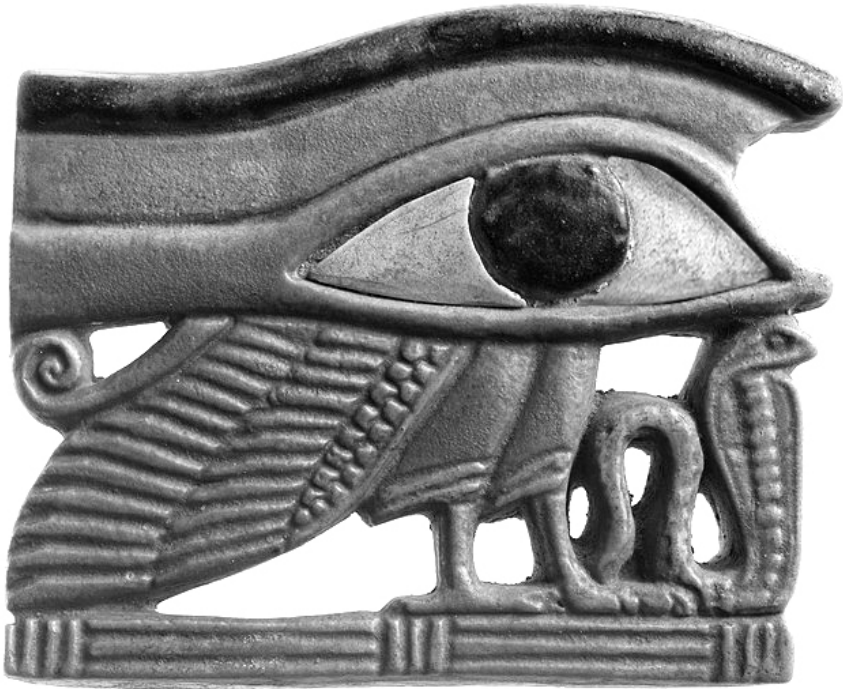


Several ancient Egyptian wisdom texts, such as the “Instructions of Ani,” and the “Instructions of Amenemope” stressed the importance of treating people with disabilities with compassion and respect. In addition, the ancient Egyptians believed in Ma’at, a concept of justice and order that emphasized the importance of treating others fairly and with respect. This included treating people with disabilities as equal members of society, and not discriminating against them based on their physical differences. “The Instructions of Amenemope,” are often used to argue that ancient Egypt was a utopia for disabled people, but this too is an argument not based on evidence, and instead disability was probably seen as a part of life to be lived with and dealt with.



Bes was an Egyptian deity associated with music, dance, sexual pleasure, childbirth, fertility, and protection of pregnant women and infants. Bes was commonly shown as a bearded person with dwarfism, with his tongue sticking out, large ears, long hair, and bow-legged stance, often depicted holding a rattle or other symbolic items like a snake or sword.

Unlike other gods, images of Bes were kept in households, appearing at gates and bed headboards to ward off evil spirits and provide security by killing snakes and scorpions. Bes is often paired with Harpocrates in healing contexts; they are the only Egyptian gods to have feminine versions: Beset and Harpocratis.



Blindness and visual impairment was common due to warfare, diseases and parasites. The bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis* causes blindness and was common at the time. In Egyptian mythology the eye of Horus (Wedjat) was a symbol of protection and healing, and being blind was seen as a war wound from the battle between good and evil. Congenital blindness was seen as part of a divine will, while acquired blindness was not.

Imhotep, a priest of Ra in the third dynasty established a healing centre in Memphis for blind and deaf people, which was also near a prestigious music school. Blind harp players and blind singers are often depicted in art and were respected and sought after for royal courts and harems.



The Cairo Toe (1000 BCE) is one of the oldest functional prosthetics. It was designed for a high status woman and was made of durable materials like wood and leather. There is evidence it was refitted several times and would likely have improved mobility and balance. The toe was amputated while the woman was alive, as it had healed over.

While early research had indicated that prosthetics were used to prepare bodies for the afterlife, this was the first one that was functional during the life of the amputee. The Cartonnage Toe (600 BCE) was an aesthetic prosthesis with an inlaid toenail which was unlikely to have been as functionally useful as it was produced from painted linen and paper-mache, and was perhaps made for someone of lower status.



The Dispute between a Man and His Ba (Soul) is a Middle Kingdom (c.1991-1802 BCE) text in which a man's soul argues with him and convinces him not to die by suicide. The man wishes to die since he has experienced life's hardships, and he longs to reach the paradise of the afterlife. However, his ba, reminds him that all men share the same fate regardless of social status, and all men's legacies fade even with the performance of funerary rites. It urges him to continue his religious practices in hope of an afterlife, but to continue his life and not wish for its end before its time. This text is perhaps one of the first depictions of depression and mental illness in Egyptian history. Egyptian medical texts such as the Ebers Papyrus describe conditions which doctors would treat that also resemble mental illness.



Djebo (Djeder) (c. 346 BCE) was a man who lived during ancient Egypt's Late Period. He was buried in Saqqara in an elaborate granite sarcophagus in his patron Tjaiharpta's tomb. His presence in the tomb and the quality of the sarcophagus indicates his favored status with his patron.

Djebo is depicted on the sarcophagus naked, with the proportions of dwarfism in a profile stance. Inscriptions on the sarcophagus's lid reveal that he was a dancer who performed in funerary ceremonies of the cults of the Apis and Memphis sacred bulls. Unlike the other people with dwarfism's biographies here from ancient Egypt, Djebo's patron was a non-royal elite.



Harpocrates or “Horus the Child,” is an Egyptian god associated with childhood, silence, the embodiment of hope, and representative of the newborn sun. He is also associated with the protection of women, and children. He was depicted as being born prematurely, having a mobility impairment in his legs and having cerebral palsy.

Harpocrates is often depicted making the sign for silence by holding one finger pointed upwards to their lips. He is frequently paired with Bes in healing contexts: they are the only Egyptian gods to have feminine versions: Beset and Harpocratis.



Hatshepsut (c. 1479 BCE) is perhaps one of the best known female pharaohs of ancient Egypt. She ushered in an age of economic growth, peace, and prosperity for Egypt under her rule after originally ruling as a regent for her stepson Thutmose III when he was a child, before assuming the full title of pharaoh.

She was typically depicted wearing male kingly regalia fitting of her position as pharaoh. She is believed to have had bone cancer, diabetes, and arthritis at the time of her death, based on examinations of remains that Egyptologists think are hers.



Horus aka “Horus the Younger” was the Egyptian god of kingship, healing, protection, the sky, and the sun. He is one of the nine main gods of the Ennead, and is the son of Osiris and Isis. Horus’s evil uncle Set murdered Osiris, and took over the throne of Egypt. Horus was raised in secret by Isis until he was old enough to challenge Set for the throne.

During his fight with Set, depending upon the myth, he was blinded in either one or both eyes. His sight was later magically restored, but his blind eye became a udjat/wedjat/wadjet amulet used by the ancient Egyptians as a protective symbol.



Khnumhotep (c.2350 BCE) was a man who lived during the 6th dynasty of ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom. We have a surviving portrait statue whose inscriptions tell us his name and describe him as a dancer, overseer of the royal wardrobe, and overseer of ka-priests: the priests who performed daily rituals for the deceased. These titles reveal he was a respected essential part of the pharaoh's court and was of elite status in ancient Egyptian society. The painted limestone statue depicts him smiling serenely, standing arms by his side wearing a white linen kilt which is knotted in the front. He is depicted as a person with dwarfism with a larger torso and short legs and arms. Khnumhotep is also described in the statue's inscriptions as dancing at the funerals of two sacred bulls.



There is a 5th dynasty man from Denderah who was found buried with a cane. He had his left leg two inches shorter than his right one, and the cane was deliberately placed next to him in his sarcophagus for use as a mobility aid.

While he has traditionally been described as having polio, Egyptologist Aidan Dodson has recently put forward the theory that he might have cerebral palsy utilising the embodiment of his own lived experience of the disability as a source of expertise.



Pataikos was a version of the Egyptian god Ptah who was a person with dwarfism. In some versions of the myths he is alternately considered a son of Ptah. He was a protective deity who was typically depicted in amulet form as a nude dwarf person in a bow legged stance with a scarab on his head. He strangles various dangerous animals: snakes, scorpions, and stands on the backs of crocodiles: the amulets are meant to literally show him controlling chaos.

Pataikos was frequently also depicted with the goddess of war, Sekhmet, and Nefertem, the god of the lotus. Pataikos was equated by the ancient Greeks to their god Hephaestus.



Pereniankh (c.2613 BCE) was a man who lived to be 45-50 years old during the 4th dynasty in ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom. His mastaba style tomb is located in the Royal Necropolis of Giza, close to the Pyramids, and he was buried with both of his wives who based on skeletal and artistic evidence were both non-disabled. He is the only person with dwarfism from ancient Egypt for whom we have skeletal, artistic, and written evidence. The basalt statue depicts him seated wearing a white linen kilt and curled wig, holding a sekhem scepter and long staff. Pereniankh held the titles of administrator of the treasury, and royal acquaintance of the Great House, meaning he was also a member of the pharaoh's court. He is speculated by some Egyptologists to have been Seneb's father based on his tomb's location.



Ptah was an Egyptian primordial creator god and patron of craftsmen and architects who was a person with dwarfism. He was revered for his role in creating himself, crafting the world and giving life to all people and gods through the power of speech and the design of his heart. Ptah is said to have crafted the bodies of the gods for them to inhabit, similar to how human craftsmen would create statues of gods.

He is often portrayed with green skin, symbolizing rebirth, and was associated with symbols of power, life, and stability like the 'was scepter', the ankh, the 'djed pillar' and the 'Apis bull'. The name "Egypt" is partially derived from the name of his temple.



Queen Ati “Queen of Punt” was depicted as having a twisted spine and a considerable amount of body weight. She is documented as a prominent figure at Hatshepsut’s temple at Deir el-Bahri (c. 1550-1292 BCE). It shows her during an Egyptian expedition to Punt, a major trading partner for Egypt, which brought back exotic goods such as incense, cosmetics, blackwood ebony, cinnamon, ivory, gold and wild animals.

Punt may have been somewhere around the Horn of Africa, possibly Northwestern Eritrea.

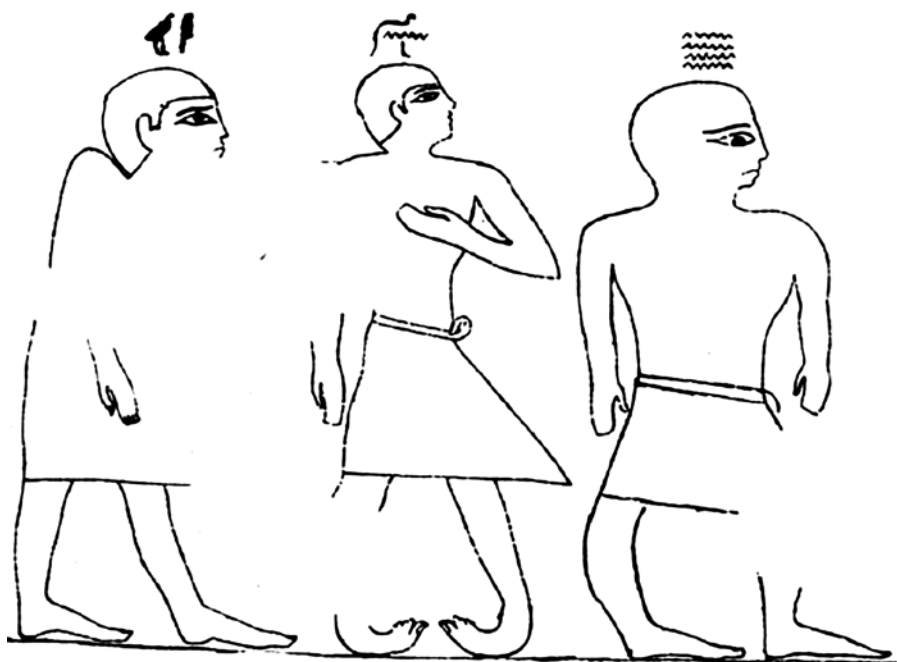


Roma the doorkeeper appears on a limestone stele and appears to have a leg with contractions and muscle loss as well as a walking stick. People have proposed that this condition might be Poliomyelitis or club foot. Egyptologist Aidan Dodson using his own embodiment of disability has also proposed this might be cerebral palsy.

The stele is dedicated to the goddess Astarte (1400-1365 BC). The position of doorkeeper may have been ceremonial or religious, similar to a guardian of a threshold.



Seneb (2520 BCE) (ancient Egyptian for “Healthy”) was a man with dwarfism who lived during the Old Kingdom period in ancient Egypt. His tomb stands in the Royal Necropolis of Giza close to the Pyramids, and while his body was lost and most contents looted long ago, the inscriptions from his false door and statue tell us a few things about his life. He held many ceremonial titles such as Holder of the King’s Linen and Overseer of the Sacred Barque, and served as a Priest of Wadjet. He had a wife named Senitites, who was a Priestess of Hathor and Neith, and with whom he had three children. His inscriptions tell us he participated in the funeral procession of the Pharaoh Khufu, and that he owned “several thousand herds of cattle”. He was undoubtedly a man of great importance.



There are three disabled servants from the tomb of the viziers Khety and Baqt in Beni Hassan. The tomb dates to the First Intermediate Period. One servant has a spinal curvature and is the very last in line but damage has erased the central part of the paint. Few anatomical details have been rendered on the representation, but we can still see that the bump was rendered by an elevation of the right arm as well as a lower-than-average head. Preceding him is a man with clubbed foot, and a man with dwarfism. Each man has an inscription above him: "dwarf person," "disabled" [i.e. lower limb impairment] and the word *jw* above the person with a spinal disability, which is a hapax. Egyptologist P. E. Newberry considered that it could be the name of the man, while for A. Erman and H. Grapow, the word designates infirmity: "a physically disabled man."



Siptah was a child pharaoh with a clubfoot who ruled for six years after ascending to the throne at age eleven (1193-1187 BCE). His name means “Son of Ptah, Beloved of Ptah” and his throne name meant “Beautiful for Re, Chosen by Re”. His left foot had contractions, which may have been due to poliomyelitis, but also possibly cerebral palsy.

He died young, around age sixteen. During his reign, Egypt was functionally in control of his stepmother Queen Twosret and Chancellor Bay also played a part in taking the throne. Siptah ruled at a politically complex time with many challenges.



The work of a scribe involved long hours doing repetitive tasks in strained postures that took their toll on their bodies. People who were literate in ancient Egypt often had higher positions in society and consequently were likely to live longer. Scribes were a critical part of administering the bureaucracy involved in maintaining a complex civilisation.

The work of a scribe involved spending hours in cross legged or kneeling postures and using a pen, which caused overloading and strain on muscles and joints. The rates of osteoarthritis and other health problems in the joints was much higher among scribes than the general population. The skeletal remains of scribes still bear the marks of these occupational hazards on the jaw, neck, shoulder, knee, ankle and hip joints.



King Tutankhamun, whose name means “living image of Amun” is perhaps the most famous figure from ancient Egypt due to his tomb being almost intact when discovered. He ascended the throne at eight years old and ruled for nine years (1332-1323 BCE). He likely had multiple disabilities, including a clubfoot and a cleft palate. He also had twisted hips and various issues which may have resulted from genetic issues due to inbreeding. He was buried with multiple canes, some of which had handles modeled on rival heads of state. He reversed many of his father’s changes during his reign, reestablishing the prominence of the god Amun, moving the capital back to Memphis and restoring traditional polytheistic worship. Like all other pharaohs, he was worshiped as a living god during his lifetime.

Ankhudjes was a high status man who was depicted in ancient Egyptian tomb art as having a S shaped curved spine. He is standing, left leg forward. He holds in his hands the attributes of the dignitary, the medu cane and the sekhem scepter. On one figure, he wears a panther skin over his short half-pleated loincloth. Ankhudjes's depiction conforms to the defined Egyptian art canon, with a detachment of the arm which is bent at 90° in the upper part, with particular attention to the rendering of the muscles and bones, meaning this was most likely a realistic depiction.

Anysis (aka Tefnakht). One ancient historian, Herodotus, tells us about a mysterious pharaoh named Anysis. This pharaoh is now believed to be the pharaoh Tefnakht. Tefnakht was the founder of the 24th dynasty (732-720 BCE). He re-established control in Lower Egypt. Herodotus says that Anysis/Tefnakht was blind. Some Egyptologists believe this might be true based on a letter that Anysis/Tefnakht sent to his enemy Piye, the Kushite king. In it Tefnakht says, "Be gracious! I cannot see your face in the days of shame..." Tefnakht/Anysis did eventually lose in battle to Piye. However, Tefnakht/Anysis remained pharaoh of Lower Egypt. His capture and unification of Lower Egypt made him more powerful than any other pharaoh of the preceding 200 years.

The Durham Hand was a prosthetic hand which is kept in Durham which was found with a nameless priestess mummy (c. 300 BCE). The exact origin of their damaged painted coffin is unknown but it is thought to come from Akhmim in Upper Egypt. She was born without a fully formed left arm, had malnutrition, a slipped disc and a broken toe among other health problems. When she was mummified an artificial hand was crafted out of linen, this was to ensure that she would have a functional hand in the afterlife. Sadly her name was lost when the coffin was damaged.

Geheset was a noblewoman who likely had cerebral palsy and who may have lived to be 50-60 years old and may have been of Nubian descent (1795-1720 BCE). She was a prominent member of the pharaoh's court and was married to a judge named Imeni. The claim that she had cerebral palsy is evidenced by her arm being in a rigid position, the left side of her body having had to work harder to function than the right and her teeth showing evidence of drooling.

Khnum-Nakht (1985-1773 BCE) was a high priest of the god Khnum and was the son of a local mayor. He had a rare dental condition known as double germination, where the central teeth are significantly enlarged, sharing multiple roots. He had a lavishly decorated royal tomb and was buried with his half-brother with the same mother, named Khnum-aa, but different fathers. The outer coffin has spells requesting that he will sit on the boat of the sun god as he crosses the heavens, and will become the son of the sky goddess and be in the circle of deities after death. He was buried with statuettes of the tomb owners as well as wooden models of boats and servants.

Per-Nefers was a high ranking court official with dwarfism from 6th dynasty Egypt. He is one of several individuals with dwarfism in high ranking court positions seen during Egypt's Old Kingdom. People with dwarfism were not uncommon in Old Kingdom tomb scenes. To date there are 115 carved relief and painted depictions of individuals with dwarfism across 71 scenes in 56 tombs identified. Common professions for individuals with dwarfism during this period included jewelers, animal tenders, attendants/servants and offering bearers, musicians, cattle attendants, dancers, boat captains, and bird catchers.

Ramesses-Meryamun-Nebweben had a hunched back, a twisted spine and lived to be about 30. He spent most of his life in the harem palace of Merwer. He was the youngest son of Ramses II, but was not often mentioned in lists of his children. The only evidence came from inscriptions on his coffins. His unusual shape meant he couldn't fit a standard coffin and so was buried in the unused outer coffin of when his great grandfather, Ramesses I, was a vizier. The name "Nebweben" translates to "lord of sunshine," which was more commonly used by high officials than the royal family.

There is a woman with dwarfism buried in the worker's necropolis near the Great Pyramid. Being buried near the pyramids was considered a great honour. She was between 25-30 years old when she died in childbirth. Her family cared enough to pay for both her and her deceased infant's funeral and burial. Unfortunately, her name and funerary goods did not survive.

Would you like to know more?

Articles

Alexandra F. Morris, Kyle Lewis Jordan, Georgia Barker and Rebecca Whiting. "Eight histories of disabled people in ancient Egypt," British Museum Blog Post

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Books

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Organisations

UK Disability History and Heritage Hub
<https://ukdishisthub.mystrikingly.com/>

This zine is produced by the **Disability Action Research Kollektive** (DARK), which is a disabled-led group working to make disability perspectives, history, and research more accessible to a general audience. We are always looking for disabled (and non-disabled) volunteers to help write, edit and share their perspectives. Be part of something bigger than yourself, join us in the DARK today!



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