



© Photographic credit Fondation Gandur pour l'Art. Photographer: André Longchamp

**Statuette of a fighting dwarf**

Solid cast bronze

5.8 x 4.9 x 2.5 cm

Italy, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD

FGA-ARCH-GR-0100

**Provenance**

Collection Frances Artuner, 1960s

Fortuna Fine Arts Ltd, New York

Acquired on 23.11.2013

**Exhibition**

*Cleopatra y la fascinación de Egipto* [Exhibition catalogue, Madrid, Centro de Exposiciones Arte Canal 03.12.2015-08.05.2016]

**Former publications**

Gentili, Almagro-Gorbea, *Cleopatra*, p. 249, No. 103.

Tassignon, Isabelle (dir.), *Fondation Gandur pour l'art. Les antiquités classiques*, II. Deliciae, Milan, 5 Continents Editions, 2022, No. 16.



## And then the dwarfs swarmed into the Empire

A collector is often under the impression that his pieces are unique. But like today, some objects were mass-produced in antiquity, and this notably applies to bronze figures. As we shall see, when studying such a piece wrongly considered unparalleled, we end up embarking on a hunt for small bronzes.

### Footprints of small men at the sources of the Nile

Once again, the statuette in question is that of a dwarf. The ancients loved them: in Antiquity, being a dwarf was a token of otherness, sometimes of divinity. Figures of dwarfs made of bronze or terracotta were looked for by art connoisseurs, and for a wealthy Roman citizen, adorning one's house walls with tiny beings frolicking in a verdant landscape was the epitome of good taste.

Our little man suffers from achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism characterized by a disproportionate head, short neck, enlarged muscles and short, crooked limbs (*fig. 1*)<sup>1</sup>. He also displays a grotesquely over-sized penis and several signs of savagery, like his untrimmed curly beard and his nakedness which, in the eyes of the ancients, pertained to populations dwelling in the far reaches of the known world. Other curious details, like very minute cavities scattered on the surface of his bald head, or an incised line crossing his forehead horizontally, are certainly meaningful.

If it was usual to show the body of small-sized persons as twisted by physical efforts, our small bronze man adopts an unexpected posture: stretched body, legs spread, with his torso tilted backwards and aside; his right arm is raised at head level, the hand grasping a thin element which is now lost. It looks as if he was about to strike an invisible adversary held in front of him with his left hand.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dasen, *Dwarfs*, p. 8-11.



## Dwarfs galore, from Herculaneum to Baltimore

As a proof of its popularity, this bearded and bellicose dwarf has plenty of twins and brothers, all of them displaying a very similar height (from 5.6 to 6 cm). Identified in public or private collections or on the art market, some of them are of unknown provenance, while others were found *in situ*<sup>2</sup>. Several are unpublished or lost, while some are only known from old drawings (*fig. 2*).

### *Found in situ*

Even when their provenance is known, little can be said about archaeological contexts: due to the old age of their discovery, the records are always vague. Gaul was a privileged area for the distribution of these statuettes: one of them was found in situ in Tongeren, in Gallia Belgica<sup>3</sup>; two are kept in the collections of the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, one of them originally from the Rhône-Alpes region<sup>4</sup>. Another, kept in Lyon, was uncovered in Arles<sup>5</sup>. Prosper Mérimée has drawn a similar statuette, presumably found in Narbonne<sup>6</sup>.

Italy is the other main place of discovery for these small bronzes: the one kept at the Walters Art Museum of Baltimore might come from Etruria<sup>7</sup>, like the one in Copenhagen, the one from the former Hartwig collection and the one at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston<sup>8</sup>. Two of them are kept at the British Museum, one of them given by Sir William Hamilton who acquired many objects in Italy, and particularly in Campania, the other by Richard Payne Knight, who also travelled there several times<sup>9</sup>. Another one, known by the count of Caylus,

---

<sup>2</sup> Stéphanie Boucher (Boucher, *Recherches*, p. 188, n. 79) had already listed several of them, to which new pieces can now be added.

<sup>3</sup> Liège, Grand Curtius Museum, Fonds IAL: Faider-Feytmans, *Les bronzes romains*, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, Inv. Bronze.59 and Inv. 52.10007.

<sup>5</sup> Lyon, Lugdunum Musée et Théâtres romains, Inv. br.075; Boucher, *Recherches*, p. 188, n. 79; Picon, Condamin, Boucher, "Recherches", p. 156 (No. 125).

<sup>6</sup> Reinach, *Répertoire*, II, p. 564, No. 6 (Narbonne museum); Boucher, *Recherches*, p. 188, n. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Inv. 54.1115.

<sup>8</sup> Boucher, *Recherches*, p. 188, n. 79: the one from the former Hartwig collection (Rome), mentioned in Reinach, *Répertoire*, IV, p. 358, No. 3, and that from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Inv. H. 247, come from Orvieto. The one in Boston, Inv. 96.669, is said to have been acquired in Florence.

<sup>9</sup> London, British Museum, Inv. 1772,0302.96 (object coll. Hamilton) and 1824,0431.1 (object coll. Payne Knight).



would come from Herculaneum<sup>10</sup>. As to the unpublished statuettes preserved in Rome or Naples<sup>11</sup>, their precise provenance is unclear, but one can reasonably assume that they were also found in Italy.

### *Without context*

The piece from the former Schimmel collection<sup>12</sup> is slightly better preserved, as it displays the fragment of a slender element in the right hand, which became folded over time. Three other dwarfs are kept in museums, respectively in Budapest, Cassel and Vienna<sup>13</sup>. One can also mention those of the former collections Morven<sup>14</sup> and von Faber-Castell<sup>15</sup>, as well as two pieces on the art market online<sup>16</sup>. The one in the Louvre, although much more rudimentary, stems from the same model<sup>17</sup>. So in total, we are now considering at least 24 of these fighting dwarfs, spread across the world, and divided into three groups<sup>18</sup>: by far the largest, a group of statuettes which are perfectly identical by their dimensions, iconography, musculature and sex posture. And two isolated pieces: the one in the Louvre, which could be a copy, and the one from Narbonne, whose head displays a circlet adorned with lotus buds.

---

<sup>10</sup> Boucher, *Recherches*, p. 188, n. 79: the dwarf known by Caylus, *Recueil*, VII, 32, 4, was preserved in his time at the "Cabinet d'Antiques" of Portici.

<sup>11</sup> Naples, National Archaeological Museum, No. 5455; Rome, Capitoline Museums: Boucher, *Recherches*, p. 188, n. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffmann, in Muscarella, *Ancient Art*, No. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. 51.2855; Cassel museum: Bieber, *Die antiken Skulpturen*, p. 74, No. 239; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. AS VI 158: von Sacken, *Die antiken Bronzen*, p. 68, pl. xxvi, No. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Christie's, live auction 1466, 8.06.2004, lot 489, *The Morven Collection of Ancient Art*.

<sup>15</sup> Cahn Auktionen AG, Auktion 8, 9.11.2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Invaluable*, lot No. 102 and Artemis Gallery, auction 16.02.2024, lot 20a (with traces of silver inlay in the eyes).

<sup>17</sup> Paris, Louvre, Inv. Br 6098/N 7052.

<sup>18</sup> One could also add those mentioned by Bieber, *Die antiken Skulpturen*, p. 74, No. 239, formerly kept in Munich, Mainz and Karlsruhe, and that of the Charles Newton-Robinson collection, for which I was unable to check whether they pertain to the same iconographic type.



## The geranomachy

An athlete to some, a wrestler, a harpooner or even a gladiator to others: since 2000 years, this amusing bronze grotesque persists in slaying a ghost. But what did this mysterious lost enemy look like? In antiquity, an ancient and popular theme implied a fight of dwarfs against cranes: the “geranomachy” (from the Greek *geranos* “crane”)<sup>19</sup>. It is notably mentioned in a dramatic passage of the *Iliad*<sup>20</sup>, when the Trojans about to face the Greeks start shouting like cranes striking pygmies. Cranes like Trojans wreak havoc, and their shrieks are a harbinger of death.

The myth mentioned here brings into opposition the wading birds and small, “fist-sized” men, as their Greek name “pygmies” suggests (from the Greek *pygmè* “fist”), who were supposed to live on the banks of the Nile or in Ethiopia. As to the cranes, after spending the summer in the northern regions of Europe and Asia, they migrated southwards, and as for the regions known to the Greeks, to the south of Egypt, Ethiopia, and later India, Thrace or Anatolia<sup>21</sup>. A yearly and relentless confrontation between these adversaries of old, large migrating wading birds against short-sized settled farmers. The former would destroy the crop of the latter, who would revenge by eating the birds’ eggs and younglings. As a supreme insult, the little men lived in huts made of mud mixed with feathers and eggshells...<sup>22</sup> From the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the little crane-fighters were depicted as achondroplastic dwarfs with black African or Caucasian features, with or without beard, and often bald.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ballabriga, “Les malheurs des Nains”, *pass*.

<sup>20</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, III, 1-7: “Now when they were marshalled, the several companies with their captains, the Trojans came on with clamour and with a cry like birds, even as the clamour of cranes ariseth before the face of heaven, when they flee from wintry storms and measureless rain, and with clamour fly toward the streams of Ocean, bearing slaughter and death to Pigmy men, and in the early dawn they offer evil battle.” (translation A.T. Murray).

<sup>21</sup> A very widespread myth, well-attested among other traditions, as in China or among American Indians, see Scobie, “The Battle”, *pass*.

<sup>22</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, VII, 26-27.



## Bald people, beware of cranes

On one side, birds whose lightness and swiftness was stressed by Aesop, as well as their somewhat dull feathers and above all their pointed beak, which was either a help or a hindrance, according to the context<sup>23</sup>. On the other, miniature men from the south, remote from any civilization, who make do with improvised weapons to face the enemy from above. According to Hecataeus of Miletus, pygmies defended their crop by wearing horns, playing castanets or even dressing up as rams<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, there was no “Iron Dome” to protect them from the nosedive attacks of the sharp-beaked waders.

From the onset, the tone is comical. The birds make good use of their size and beak to outwit their little adversaries. As a first example, a Mycenaean krater from Cyprus of the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC shows two little men on a chariot fleeing from a gigantic long-necked bird (*fig. 3*)<sup>25</sup>. Also from Cyprus, a jug of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC shows a small stocky man shown full-face (a rare feature) next to a huge bird with pointed beak, directed towards his head (*fig. 4*)<sup>26</sup>. Another example parodies the labor of Heracles and the Stymphalian birds, as it shows a tiny version of the divine hero about to strike a crane with his club (*fig. 5*)<sup>27</sup>. On another vase, a bearded and naked dwarf is knocked down by a flying crane pecking at his bald head (*fig. 6*). If the birds are keen on attacking the pygmies' head, the latter's bare and plump buttocks, as well as exaggerated penis, are also choice targets, as seen on a vase from the Kabeirion of Thebes (*fig. 7*)<sup>28</sup>. A long-lasting iconographic tradition thus explains the multitude of tiny cavities on the bald head, or even the whole body, of our dwarfs. As for the cranes, their long and thin

---

<sup>23</sup> Aesop, *Fables*: “The Geese and the Cranes” (swiftness); “The Peacock and the Crane” (dull feathers); “The Wolf and the Crane” (long sharp beak which can remove a bone stuck in a wolf's throat); “The Fox and the Crane” (beak too sharp to eat with a plate).

<sup>24</sup> Hecataeus of Miletus, 1 F 328 Jacoby; Navarre, “*Pygmaei*”, p. 782.

<sup>25</sup> Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, from Enkomi; Mackowiak, “L'iconographie”, *pass.*, which shows the iconographic continuity of the geranomachy along an axis passing through Egypt, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Rhodes. For the list of the first depictions of the myth, see Karageorghis, “Une représentation”, *pass.*, and Mackowiak, “L'iconographie”, *pass.*

<sup>26</sup> Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, 1938/IX-8/1; Karageorghis, “Une représentation”, p. 49-50.

<sup>27</sup> Louvre, pelike, inv. M 50, 375-350 BC.

<sup>28</sup> Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Inv. SM 3159; Wolters, Bruns, *Das Kabirenheiligtum*, p. 108, M 7, pl. 29, fig. 3 and 4, and pl. 53, fig. 2; Dasen, *Dwarfs*, p. 185; Mackowiak, “L'iconographie”, *pass.*, fig. 3.



neck can also be a weakness: on the same vase, a Pygmy is shown biting into a bird's neck while holding it with both hands (*fig. 7*)<sup>29</sup>. Sometimes a Pygmy, having seized the bird's neck, is about to strike it with a spear.

So these boastful and vindictive dwarfs, who apparently keep something at a distance with their left arm while striking it with the right, can be understood in the light of more ancient depictions: their posture is that of a dwarf threatening a crane with a spear.

### **“Alexandrian” bronzes produced elsewhere**

Our statuettes can be described as “Alexandrian” bronzes: small, very decorative objects inspired by exotic themes, such as “grotesques”, slaves, or black persons. Produced in the early Imperial period (late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD), they are inspired by topics which were very valued in Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries.

A few Alexandrian statuettes, made of bronze or ivory, show what their models may have looked like. They display typically Egyptian features, such as the lotus circlet, a thin ornament circling the skullcap, with lotus buds above (among “our” dwarfs, only the one from Narbonne is equipped with it). In this regard, the closest piece to the series of fighting dwarfs is the one decorating the end of a handle, which shows a dwarf with lotus buds on his head, his left arm protected by a small shield (*fig. 8*)<sup>30</sup>. In Alexandria, the fighter often has the upper hand over the bird, which he tramples or even carries on his back after killing it (as shown by an ivory figure found in Etruria but originally from Alexandria, *fig. 9*)<sup>31</sup>. Our little bronzes probably derive from one of these Alexandrian types, or from a common model: the incised line on their forehead is probably a remnant of the ancient lotus bud circlet worn by the dwarfs from Alexandria.

---

<sup>29</sup> See also Wolters, Bruns, *Das Kabirenheiligtum*, p. 111, M 29, pl. 12, which is a simplified imitation of the vase Berlin SM 3159; Mackowiak, “L'iconographie”, fig. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum, inv. C 650; Dasen, “Pygmaioi”, p. 597, No. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Florence, Archaeological Museum; Dasen, “Pygmaioi”, p. 597, No. 39.



### The input of archaeometry

Fortunately, the exemplar from the Lyon museum could be analyzed: its alloy is the same as that of cast and wheel-turned ware<sup>32</sup>, a speciality of Campanian workshops. Cast in a mold, the rough drafts were finished by chiseling while cold. The sculptor took care of details, such as the volume of the muscles, the streams of the beard, and various inlays. Indeed, as for all others, the hollowed pupils of the Fondation's statuette were once inlaid with other materials. Several of them, notably the one at the Walters Art Museum, show black and white remains which still give them a particular appeal.

### The migration of "Alexandrian" bronzes

The Roman customers interested in these "grotesque" statuettes were Italian: at least one of these dwarfs was uncovered in Campania. In the villas of this region, they could be associated with Nilotic scenes<sup>33</sup>. But these pieces also attracted connoisseurs in the whole Empire: in Gaul, or even in Pannonia, several of these dwarfs were found in areas not far from the main river navigation or terrestrial routes<sup>34</sup>. Migrating dwarfs, so to speak.

Dr Isabelle Tassignon  
Curator of the Archaeology collection  
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, September 2024

---

<sup>32</sup> Picon, Condamin, Boucher, "Recherches", p. 156 (No. 125). Such metallographic analyses would be necessary to check whether the alloy of identical statuettes is the same or not.

<sup>33</sup> Barrett, "Recontextualizing", p. 311, n. 72: scenes of geranomachy in houses II.9.2 and VIII,7.24; more general scenes showing Pygmies in houses V, 2; VII, 4, 51 and 31; VIII, 3, 13.

<sup>34</sup> See Malaise, "À propos d'un buste-balsamaire", *pass.*





## Bibliography

Ballabriga, Alain, "Les malheurs des Nains. Quelques aspects du combat des grues contre les Pygmées dans la littérature grecque", *Revue des Études Anciennes*, 83, 1981, p. 57-74.

Barrett, Caitlin, "Recontextualizing nilotic scenes: Interactive Landscapes in the Garden of the Casa dell'Efebo, Pompeii", *American Journal of Archaeology*, 121, 2017, p. 293-332.

Bieber, Margarete, *Die antiken Skulpturen und Bronzen des königl. Museum Fridericianum in Cassel*, Marburg, N. G. Elwertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1915.

Boucher, Stéphanie, *Recherches sur les bronzes figurés de Gaule pré-romaine et romaine*, Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 228, Rome, École française de Rome, 1976.

Dasen, Véronique, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993.

Dasen, Véronique, "Pygmaioi", in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, VII, 1994, p. 594-601.

de Caylus, Anne Claude, Comte, *Recueil d'antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques, romaines et gauloises*, Paris, 1752-1767.

Faider-Feytmans, Germaine, *Les bronzes romains de Belgique*, Mayence, Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 1979.

Gentili, Giovanni, Almagro-Gorbea, Martín (éds), *Cleopatra y la fascinación de Egipto* [Catalogue d'exposition, Madrid, Centro de Exposiciones Arte Canal 03.12.2015-08.05.2016], Milan, Skira, 2015.

Karageorghis, Vassos, "Une représentation de pygmée et de grue sur un vase cypriot du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. ", *Revue archéologique*, 1972/1, p. 47-52 (*Études de céramique et de peinture antiques offertes à Pierre Devambez*).

Mackowiak, Karin, "L'iconographie des pygmées d'une rive à l'autre de la Méditerranée : influences et évolutions d'un thème", *Ktêma*, 33, 2008, p. 281-298.

Malaise, Michel, "À propos d'un buste-balsamaire en bronze du musée de Tongres. Sur les traces d'influences alexandrines à Atuatuca", *Latomus*, 29, 1970, p. 142-156.

Muscarella, Oscar White (ed.), *Ancient Art. The Norbert Schimmel Collection*, Mayence, Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 1974.

Navarre, Octave, "Pygmaei", in Daremberg, Charles, Saglio, Edmond, Pottier, Edmond, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, Paris, 1871, p. 782-784. (en ligne : <https://dagr.univ-tlse2.fr/consulter/2461/PYGMAEI>)



Picon, Maurice, Condamin, Jeanne, Boucher, Stéphanie, "Recherches techniques sur les bronzes de Gaule Romaine, II", *Gallia*, 25, 1967, p. 153-168.

Reinach, Salomon, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine*, II, Paris, 1908.

Reinach, Salomon, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine*, IV, Paris, 1924.

Scobie, Alex, "The Battle of the Pygmies and the Cranes in Chinese, Arab, and North American Indian Sources", *Folklore*, 82, 1975, p. 122-132.

von Sacken, Eduard, *Die antiken Bronzen des K. K. Münz- und Antiken -Cabinetes in Wien*, Vienne, 1871.

Wolters, Paul, Bruns, Gerda, *Das Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben*, I, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter & co, 1940.



## Figures

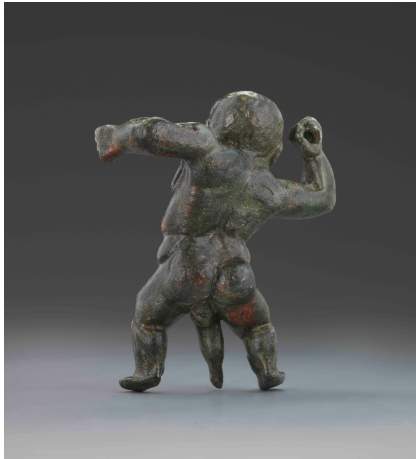


Fig. 1: Dwarf, solid cast bronze (back) FGA-ARCH-GR-0100, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.  
© Photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'art, Geneva. Photographer: André Longchamp

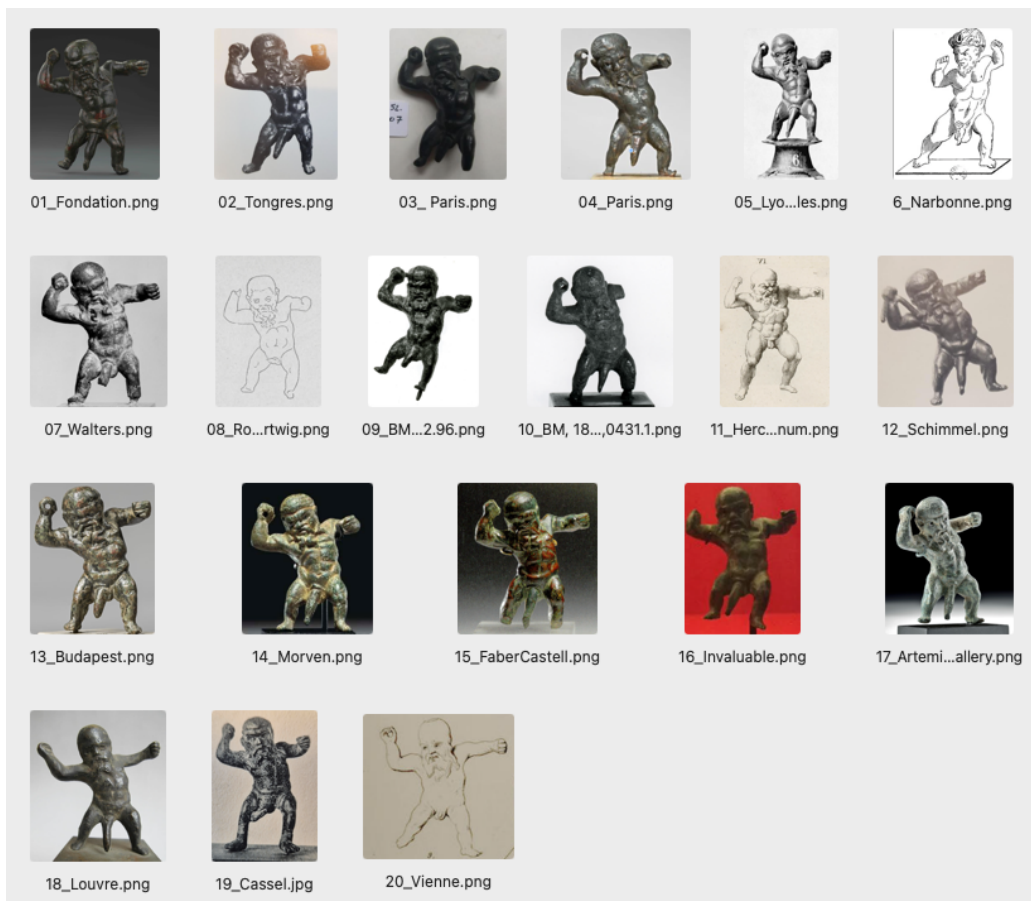


Fig. 2: Some of the bronze dwarf statuettes known, either with a photograph or from drawings.



Fig. 3: Crater from Enkomi, Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, 14<sup>th</sup> c. BC.  
After Karageorghis, "Une représentation", p. 47-48, fig. 1.

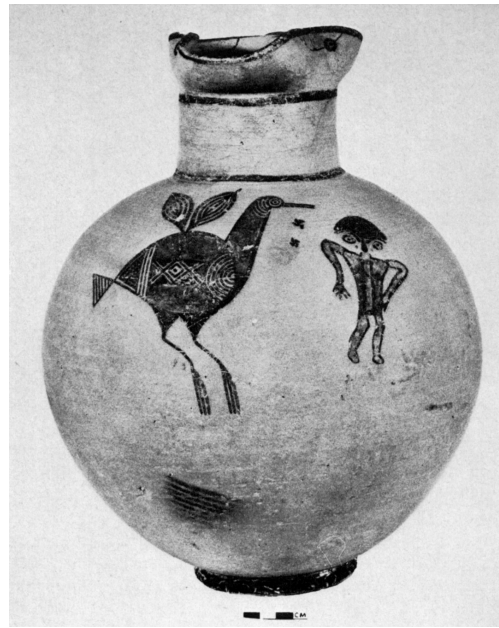


Fig. 4: Jug, Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, early 7<sup>th</sup> c. BC.  
Inv. 1938/IX-8/1. After Karageorghis, "Une représentation", p. 50, fig. 2.



Fig. 5: Louvre, pelike, Inv. M 50, 375-350 BC.  
©2006 Grand Palais RMN (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski



Fig. 6: Madrid, chous, Inv. 1999/99/119, 430-420 BC.  
© MAN / Ángel Martínez Levas



Fig. 7: Decoration on a vase from the Kabeirion of Thebes, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Inv. SM 3159, after Wolters, Bruns, *Das Kabirenheiligtum*, pl. 29, fig. 3 and 4.



Fig. 8: Knife handle, Bonn, Akad. Kunstmuseum, Inv. C 650, late 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC. After Dasen, *"Pygmaioi"*, No. 34.



Fig. 9: Dwarf, ivory, Florence, Archaeological Museum, 325 - 300 BC © CC BY 3.0