CHILDDHOOD
IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Amandine Marshall

Translated by
Colin Clement

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood in Ancient Egypt is the fruit of long but exciting work toward a doctorate. Given the variety of the documentation, I decided early on to begin my research in the Predynastic Period and to limit it to the end of the New Kingdom. In effect, the Third Intermediate Period is not just a historical turning point, with the coming to power of the priests of Amun, but it also marks two clean breaks, in the iconography and in certain funerary practices regarding children.

The aim of the work was to attempt to reconstruct the everyday life of children in ancient Egypt and to see how they were perceived by adults. This could only be achieved through a multidisciplinary approach involving all scientific fields. The sources, whether iconographic, epigraphic, literary, medical, archaeological, or anthropological, each provided a mass of information in their respective domains. This data was sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory. The intent of the research was to compare and contrast all of the sources and to endeavor to extract the closest possible vision of ancient reality.

My thesis builds upon research initiated by the Egyptologists Magdalena Stoof, Erika Feucht, as well as Rosalind and Jac J. Janssen. All the same, the Egyptian child will remain the object and not the subject of my study since the ensemble of the scientific data collected, with very rare exceptions, comes from adults and not from the children themselves. Within Egyptian iconography we have the image and the perception of the youngest members of the community as they were seen by their elders. Moreover, their representation is subjected to a large number of codes, conventions, and symbols, which remove all personality and individuality from the featured object. Archaeological data comprises artifacts linked to children and their world: whether clothes,
footwear, jewelry, toys, or games, most of it was designed by adults for the young.

Thus, to write about children’s lives in ancient Egypt is a tough job since the majority of the source material portrays the way in which adults thought about and perceived children, with a mass of ideas about the concept of childhood and no genuine information about the children themselves. The daily life lived and seen by the children is actually invisible to the multidisciplinary fields that document this work, and the sources we have are inherently biased. And so, this thesis is not just about children, but also must consider adult/child relations, the opposite being impossible given the data collected.

The fact that children are greatly underrepresented in funerary contexts, that they have left very few traces of their world, and that their daily life is never explicitly mentioned in the texts, partially explains the lack of interest in their study expressed by the academic world until now. This marked indifference has resulted in large gaps in the documentation, particularly in excavation reports where child burials feature as peripheral funerary contexts. The efforts that have been made in recent decades to demonstrate that the world of children is a major subject for study have not managed to make up for the gaps and irreversible losses of information, nor have they entirely convinced all archaeologists to publish, in full and in detail, their finds that are linked to children and their world. As a result, work and analysis based upon material that is fragmentary, incomplete, and at the same time biased has been one of the major difficulties encountered.

Any study of children in ancient Egypt necessarily requires dividing the ancient population into categories in order to pick out those who were seen as children in that era. But what value, status, or definition should we accord to the word “children”? “Child,” “children,” “childhood” are terms whose meaning varies from one society to another.

Three criteria define a child as a young individual: morphology, age, and social status. In anthropology a child is qualified as immature, since at birth its bone formation is far from complete and it must reach the age of around twenty years before being completely formed from the morphological point of view. The second criterion characterizing the state of being a child is age, which is intrinsically linked to morphology and to the physical and intellectual capacities that accord the child a particular social status. This criterion is always the same from one society to another, although the end of childhood is generally established on the basis of three considerations: moral conscience, ability to procreate, and financial independence generally resulting from a capacity to perform work that is considered to be
that of an adult. As for the social status of the child, it can be extremely variable from one community to another, and can even be subject to changes within the same society.

In ancient Egypt, what was the age or the period of transition that allowed the young to be considered as adults? A particular idea is often conveyed in Egyptological literature wherein ancient Egyptians moved from childhood to adulthood without any transition. However, a transition period did indeed exist in ancient Egypt. For simplicity’s sake we will call it “adolescence,” but we know nothing about the length of time this covered. The texts are rarely explicit on this subject and certain figurative examples must often be deduced from the general context. However, two valuable indications from the New Kingdom note the upper limit of childhood as being the age of ten years, to which we can add two later sources, which confirm the official end of childhood in the tenth year. Thus I have retained this age as the point where the period of childhood terminates, as it would have been accepted back then even if, in actual fact, the reality must have been considerably more flexible since very few people will have known their age with any certainty, just as many rural Egyptians of the present day may be unsure of their age.

This study is divided into four chapters. The first will look at the image of the child and the perception of childhood in the iconography and then in hieroglyphic writing through very varied terms. The notion of art for art’s sake did not exist in ancient Egypt. There were no artists in the modern sense of the word, only craftsmen executing commissions. The majority of iconographic media featuring children were for funerary purposes. They served precise objectives, just as the images of young Egyptians appeared for a specific reason. What codes and stylistic conventions reflected the state of being a child? The representation of the very young allowed for a visualization of the concepts of childhood that were specific to their era, but not only that. This part of the book will examine the categories of children represented. Who were they? What was the purpose of their representation? What can we deduce from the way in which the ancient Egyptians perceived childhood?

The second chapter will examine the maintenance of the child and the care expended on its being. Was it considered as a separate individual, and if so, was it treated as distinct from adults? Was the child’s social level reflected in its clothing, its hairstyle, or even in the wearing of certain jewelry? Did children wear the same accessories as adults? Or, on the other hand, were the very nature, decoration, and even material of such adornments a distinguishing feature of childhood?
The third chapter will cover the main activity blocks that governed the daily life of the child: intellectual, manual, and physical learning, which took on different forms depending on the age, gender, and social milieu of the youngster; play, which involved all sorts of entertainment; and eating. A final section in this chapter will look at the ethnographic markers that help us to understand the rites of passage from childhood to adolescence and to review certain received ideas in this area.

The protection of the child in all its aspects will be the subject of the final chapter. The inhabitants of Egypt faced all sorts of dangers whatever their age: wild animals, illness, demons and evil spirits, the dead, and even people casting malevolent magical spells. We will examine in what cases and circumstances ancient Egyptians thought it useful to put in place protective measures to safeguard their children. Were these the same for all? We will finish the book by looking at what rights, if any, children enjoyed. Were they endowed with any particular rights that protected them because of their youth? Did they receive any preferential treatment, or indifference, or even demonstrations of hostility? Could a child be considered as the heir of his or her father, or did the status of being a young person preclude succession?

Far from being a marginal or secondary subject, the topic of children in ancient Egypt proves to be an essential subject for a fuller understanding of this ancient civilization.
Egyptian iconography is above all an expression of propaganda. It uses the image as well as a large number of codes and conventions to transmit messages of different types, mainly dominated by politics, religion, and the funerary preoccupations of the ancient Egyptians. Any study of representations of children should be set within this ideological context.

The first section will focus on the distinctive signs that characterize images of children before moving on to look at the motives that led craftsmen to prefer in certain cases the representation of a real child and in others that of a symbolic individual, or even to choose to depict an adult in the guise of a child.

The third section will tackle the concepts, ideas, and messages that the image of the Egyptian child conveyed depending on the type of representation. From iconography, we will move on to writing in order to specify the way in which the child was perceived by adults and in what terms its state was expressed. By looking at the hieroglyph for the child and the terms that designated the youngest members of society, we will be able to see if childhood in ancient Egypt was broken down into several stages, in the same way as in other civilizations, or whether it was considered as a single period of life.

The Distinguishing Signs of the Image of the Child

In Egyptian art history, a certain number of codes have more readily been associated with the image of children than of adults: small size, hand or finger placed near the mouth, a sidelock of hair, nudity, and even the fact that the very young rarely wear any accessories. Often established in the Thinite Period, some of these features would gradually become emblematic of the image of childhood.
The hand or index finger held to the mouth

If there is one gesture that is considered to be especially distinctive of childhood in ancient Egypt, it is certainly that of the hand or index finger placed next to the mouth (fig. 1). This, however, should be qualified by two points: although this gesture is the only one to uniquely characterize child-related subjects, its popularity is far from uniform throughout the millennia, despite what Egyptological literature might have one believe. Of a total of 1,261 children represented on various iconographic media, only 326 hold the hand or the index finger to the mouth. This gesture is thus not as popular as one might think. Moreover, it is in clear decline after the Middle Kingdom.

Examining the categories of children associated with this gesture—real child or symbolic Child—shows that it principally characterizes the Child (89% of depictions) and rarely real children (15% of depictions).

In reality, while one might consider this gesture as particularly emblematic of the Egyptian child, it is not a question of frequency, but rather because it appears in every period, on all iconographic media, and it characterizes the depiction of the Child to the extent that it is the single distinctive sign to have been chosen as the hieroglyph of the child: (fig. 2). This is a particularly important fact that should be emphasized: apart from nudity, no other element in the representation of the child, such as the sidelock, or in its body language, such as holding a baton or a bird, is systematically encountered in all the iconographic sources and in all periods. Therefore, the gesture of the hand or finger held to the mouth can be considered as a major distinguishing sign in the depiction of the Egyptian child. Moreover, the gesture comes to be associated with the iconography of two important child-gods, Horus the Younger (the future Harpocrates) (fig. 3) and Nefertum, as well as the iconography of royal children (fig. 4).

Hand or index finger?

The iconography of the Thinite Period holds evidence of an established and specific imagery that is already stamped with precise stylistic codes as regards the image of childhood: young girls are exclusively represented
standing (fig. 5), while boys are usually seated, and have stocky legs (fig. 6). Whatever the gender or position, all hold a hand or finger to the mouth. This criterion is the only one that allows for the subject depicted to be identified as a child. Despite the small number of examples found for this period, the only doubt in the child iconography concerns the choice of the hand or index finger held to the mouth.

If we disregard amulets and seal stones, which are very small media (figs. 7a–d) on which it is very difficult to depict a child's hand or finger, the depiction of the finger appears in two-thirds of all cases. But this result should be viewed with caution, because it was acquired from a small sample of 219 subjects from different periods.
Symbolism of the right-hand side

Egyptological literature regularly proposes that there was a preference for the right hand or index finger held to the mouth. If we look at a breakdown of this gesture as a function of the side depicted, we can see that this is the case in two-thirds of examples from the Predynastic Period to the end of the New Kingdom: 220 on the right-hand side against only 104 on the left. However, this result needs to be qualified: on two-dimensional iconographic media, one never sees a child raising the finger or hand of an arm that is not entirely visible. Thus, depending on the orientation of the scene, it would not always be possible to respect the symbolism of the right-hand side. And so, when considering solely documentation in the round or high relief (group statues, statuettes, figurines, amulets, and seals), there are 166 children holding their right hand or index finger to the mouth (fig. 8) against one single subject with the left finger against the lips (fig. 9).

Significance of the gesture

The first artifacts of the Thinite Period, statuettes and figurines of children, primarily left as offerings in temples, were in all likelihood made in a limited number of centers specializing in a particular type of production, given the recurrence of already established stylistic codes and the limited materials
used—faience, common stones, or ivory. The serialization of these child statuettes and figurines could thus have been established for certain ex-votos* discovered in the temples of Satet at Elephantine and Osiris at Abydos.²

The earliest origins of the meaning of this gesture should be looked for in the very sources of Egyptian iconography. Modern explanations that define this pose as a request to be silent are unfounded, since they are generally based upon very late writings by Varro, Ovid, and Plutarch, which date to the Ptolemaic and Roman eras:

The first gods were Sky and Earth. These gods are the same as those who in Egypt are called Serapis and Isis, though Harpocrates with his finger makes a sign to me to be quiet.³
and Harpocrates, the god who holds his tongue, and urges silence, thumb in mouth.⁴

And Harpocrates is not to be regarded as an imperfect and an infant god, nor some deity or other that protects legumes, but as the representative and corrector of unseasoned, imperfect, and inarticulate reasoning about the gods among mankind. For this reason he keeps his finger on his lips in token of restrained speech or silence.⁵

These three authors only mention the finger to the mouth (the hand is ignored) and link it uniquely with Harpocrates (fig. 3). They interpret the gesture as a request for silence from the child-god, probably in the face of mysteries that must never be divulged. It is clear that this symbolic explanation, which was current in later periods, has no connection with children, who are hardly inclined to be reserved and silent, and it was certainly not initiated at the Thinite Period.⁶

One of the first mentions of this symbolic gesture is found in the Pyramid Texts,⁷ in which the god Horus is designated as:

\[ Hrh \text{ hrd nmn db}=f \text{ m r}=f \]

“Horus, young child, his finger (being) on his mouth”

While the preposition \( m \) is often translated as “in,”⁸ one should not reject the sense of “on (+body part),”⁹ “at (+body part),”¹⁰ or even “outside (+body part)”¹¹ that it could carry. Moreover, the \( m \) could also be rendered by “in front of.”¹² Thus there are a number of possible translations that fit much better with what the iconography shows us. Indeed, the gesture of the finger in the mouth is commonly adopted by the youngest children and not by their elders, and yet this attitude is uniquely characteristic of individuals in these depictions who are beyond early infancy.

The childish gesture of the hand/finger to the mouth begins a gradual decline at the end of the Old Kingdom. In the New Kingdom it is only very rarely associated with real or symbolic children. On the other hand, it experiences an unprecedented popularity in depictions of royal children and child-gods.

In ancient Egypt, the gesture of the hand held to the mouth \( f \) could encompass a variety of meanings: to call, to recite, to show someone speaking, to be silent, to eat, to drink, and even to show respect and admiration.¹³ However, the symbolism linked to children seems to be something else,
even though it is still hard to define. On the other hand, it is not impossible that the authors of later periods confused the hieroglyph of a seated man, with hand to mouth, with that of the seated child, the hand also held to the mouth，则，and so created a confusion between the symbolism invested in these two distinct signs.

In the absence of any text contemporary with the periods of interest to us, it is useless to speculate about a pose which appears standard for children but which in reality is not. Currently, with the available documents, it is difficult and risky to advance the slightest explanation.

The lock of hair
In Egyptological literature, the handful of hair that falls behind or to one side of the head of the young is often termed the “sidelock of childhood” (fig. 10). This designation is partly false in that the same feature is found on adolescents (fig. 11). Thus, it is preferable to talk of the “sidelock of youth” rather than “of childhood.”

The lock of hair appears in all periods of Egyptian iconography, although one might consider the unique attestation dated to the Thinite Period as a hapax,* given that the object on which it appears is distinct from other artifacts of its era and also of subsequent eras (fig. 12).

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END OF EXCERPT