

Giants at Heart

Regina Bringolf and Theodore John Kaczynski, reply by István Deák

July 14, 2005 issue

In response to:

Survival of the Smallest from the March 10, 2005 issue

To the Editors:

Not in *your* pages! I was fascinated by István Deák's review of the book *In Our Hearts We Were Giants* [NYR, March 10], but please don't perpetuate the misquote from Juvenal's Satires *mens sana in corpore sano* (p. 22). Juvenal mocks the foolishness of most prayers and wishes addressed to the Gods and exhorts his readers that the only thing one should pray for is a sound mind in (or and) a healthy body. *Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano*. He never implied that a sound mind can only be found in a healthy body.

Regina Bringolf

Hancock, New Hampshire

To the Editors:

In "Survival of the Smallest" [NYR, March 10], István Deák writes on page 22: "In ancient Egypt, dwarfs were often venerated like gods." Deák here is discussing pathological dwarfs. However, Paul Schebesta, *Die Bambuti-Pygmäen vom Ituri* (Brussels: Institut Royal Colonial Belge, 1938, Vol. 1, pp. 5–11), argues

persuasively that the “god-dancers” venerated by the ancient Egyptians were not pathological dwarfs at all, but pygmies from the African rain forest. Schebesta cites, *inter alia*, a letter of the pharaoh Pepi II or Pharaohs II (Sixth Dynasty) which seems clearly to support this view.


Theodore John Kaczynski

Florence, Colorado

István Deák replies:

Regina Bringolf gives us the correct interpretation of Juvenal; as with many other quotes from the classics that have passed into contemporary thought and speech, the original context has faded away and other usages have taken over. I blame my schoolteachers for citing the phrase *mens sana in corpore sano* innumerable times to justify the physical hardships they imposed on us students.

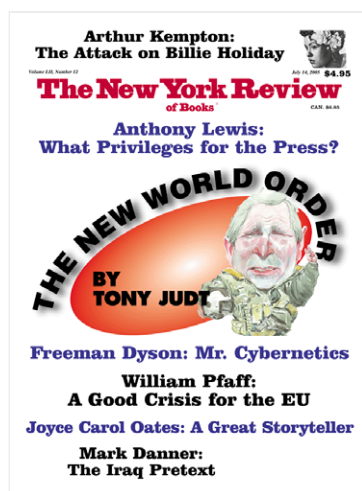
Theodore John Kaczynski cites an admirable scholar, the Austrian Catholic missionary Paul Schebesta, who, similar to other missionaries, devoted his life to the anthropology and culture of long-ignored peoples. He lived not only among the pygmies of Africa but also among those of southeastern Asia. Schebesta’s scholarship is undeniable, although he used the term “racial dwarfs” (*Rassenzwerge*), as opposed to “pathological dwarfs.” Schebesta’s thesis is that the “dwarfs” venerated by the ancient Egyptians were in reality pygmies, at least so long as the Egyptians were in contact with the people of very small but proportionate stature in the region around the sources of the Nile. Only after the pygmies supposedly moved away from the region did the Egyptians begin to venerate genuine dwarfs, that is, very small people born with deformities. The letter of the pharaoh Pepi II, around 2250 BC, to the leader of an expedition to the south expresses an almost childish joy at his bringing home a “dwarf of the god dances from the Land of the Spirits (*Geisterland*)” (Schebesta, Vol. 1, p. 9). Much later, as Schebesta argues, the increasingly mythical African pygmies became the kobolds and gnomes of European fairy tales.

My introduction to dwarfs in the ancient world derived originally from Véronique Dasen’s masterly *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Oxford University Press,

1993), which does not ignore the partly pygmy origin of the Egyptian cult of dwarfs but points to the many complexities of the issue, still ignored by Schebesta in 1938. Dasen states that there were many different dwarf deities in ancient Egypt; their representations show the well-known stature and proportions of today's dwarfs. The function of the dwarf deities was essentially protective. For instance, women in childbirth invoked their help, or as a papyrus proclaimed: "In the spell 'of the vulva,' the woman in pain shouts 'to the man for a dwarf-statue of clay'" (Dasen, p. 52). According to Dasen, the dwarf god Bes was the most familiar guardian deity of the Egyptian pantheon. But lest we forget the main function of dwarfs in later Christian society, both Dasen and Schebesta point out that dwarfs were somewhat less respected in classical Greece and that many dwarfs there became servants in luxurious households.

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