

Evaluation of Joanna Ciesielska's Ph.D. dissertation, "Social inference from mortuary remains in medieval Nubia: A multidisciplinary approach to the analysis and interpretation of Christian cemeteries at Ghazali, northern Sudan"

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This massive two-volume Ph.D. dissertation on the cemeteries of the major monastic site of Ghazali, near Karima, Sudan, represents a tremendous amount of work on the part of Ms. Joanna Ciesielska. Her research, as presented in this dissertation, forms a major contribution to Nubiology, particularly for our understanding of Christian period monasticism, as well as for bioarchaeology in Sudan. This work is largely descriptive and appropriate for publication as part of the planned Ghazali Cemeteries volume.

My comments on the dissertation are mostly minor points that should be taken into consideration when preparing for publication. I have only a few substantive comments that should be addressed. Principally, from the North American perspective, I would like to see the theoretical chapters and hypotheses earlier in the dissertation to set up the analyses as tests of those hypotheses. They otherwise seem post hoc. In general, the text should be edited for English before publication in the cemeteries volume, as there are frequently missing articles (e.g., "the") or misused words (e.g., I believe that "budging" is meant to be "burgeoning" in a couple of places, as on p. 100). "Stele" should be "stela" if singular or "stelae" if plural throughout. Additionally, "further" should be changed to "farther" throughout the text when referring to distance. Some inconsistencies should also be resolved. For example, "Makurian" and "Makurite" are used interchangeably. I suggest using "Makurian" throughout, because it is used more commonly in both the text and in published literature.

More specific comments are listed below in order of appearance by chapter/page number.

Introduction

p. 5: Most cemetery excavation at Kulubnarti was conducted in 1979, not in the 1960s.

p. 7: I appreciate the recognition of bias toward Lower Nubia in classification schemes and the variability in Christian period cemeteries that is now evident throughout Nubia.

Chapter II

p. 27: The addition of Christian-style graves at earlier Meroitic to Post-Meroitic cemeteries is significant, yet the appearance of monastic cemeteries would seem to separate them from older cemeteries or burials. Given the early date for Ghz-2-128 (p. 49), however, might the site have had some significance before the foundation of the monastery? I would appreciate some additional discussion of this possibility.

p. 29: The description of the typical Post-Meroitic burial may reflect the situation around Napata. Those in my BONE project area well upstream of the fourth cataract are more frequently in

tumuli with descending ramps from east to west with the chamber oriented north to south. Heads are typically toward the south and ceramic vessels in the north of the chamber.

p. 33: I can attest to many unmarked graves (no superstructure or only a 1-4 stones at ground level) from the late Meroitic through Christian period Qinfab School site (see Baker 2014).

p. 35: At the Qinfab School site, the Christian graves are surmounted by rock cairns. There are no box graves. The majority are Early Christian, though some are later (see Baker 2014). A few show some retention of more traditional aspects in relation to body orientation and position or inclusions.

p. 39: The orientation is in reference to what is usually called “Judgment Day” in American English.

Chapter III

p. 44 forward: Cemetery 4 is not included on the site map in Fig. 2. Its location is not clear. A map showing its relation to the main site is needed.

p. 45: I disagree with the conclusion that Christian period cemeteries in the Fourth Cataract region show no visible spatial organization. A lot of sites in the region were not included at the time of Żurawski’s (2014) compilation. Large cemeteries on Mis Island, for example, show some degree of organization (3-J-10) or areas of substantial organization (as at 3-J-11). See Ginns (2006, 2007, and 2010 reports, all of which are cited in the bibliography due to these sites being listed in Appendix II) and Ph.D. dissertations by Hurst (2013) and Soler (2012). Grave clusters are apparent at the Qinfab School site (UCSB 03-01 and 03-02) in the BONE area, the largest with some apparent regularity of spacing (see Baker 2014).

p. 47: Dating charcoal pieces from the shaft fill where it is acknowledged that they could be intrusive is problematic. It would be more secure to use textile fragments or, where not available, a bone fragment.

p. 48/Fig. 4 First, this plan apparently shows only those graves that were excavated in the cemetery based on the large number of graves shown in Fig. 3. That should be indicated in the figure caption. The radiocarbon dates are illegible even when I zoom in on the image. Please provide a table with the radiocarbon dates and label all graves that are dated or are otherwise discussed in the text with their ID number (e.g., 128).

p. 49: For Ghz-2-128, I caution that if you are skeptical about an unexpectedly early date for this individual based on the textile fragment, then you must question all your radiocarbon dates from textiles. Given the significance of this early date, I recommend obtaining a date directly from a bone fragment to corroborate it or at least an additional textile fragment. Prior to publication, a date should also be obtained from the double-vaulted tomb containing three individuals in the eastern area of Cemetery 2. This burial is very unusual, as discussed later in the dissertation.

Toward the bottom of p. 49, there is a little more information on Cemetery 4, indicating it is near the south end of Cemetery 2. As previously noted, I am puzzled as to why this area is not designated on the site map (Fig. 2) or shown in relation to Cemetery 2 on Fig. 3 or 4.

p. 64, p. 79-80: For grave substructures, it is noted that Cemetery 2 has several with ledges along the long sides of the shaft for placement of stone slabs just above the body. Interestingly, this type of substructure with flat stone slabs set across the ledges is the norm at the Qinifab School site (Baker 2014). I note that no head coverings were found at the Qinifab School site, in keeping with Ghz-3-007.

p. 85-86: It is very interesting to see the evidence of perimortem sharp-force trauma.

p. 88: The two graves containing semi-flexed individuals could suggest a more traditional burial position like that of the Post-Meroitic period being retained or, potentially, slippage from the intended position if the appendages were not bound or shrouded without any cords to tie it. Displacement of the appendages could then occur when lowering the deceased into the grave.

p. 97: At the bottom, Harris lines are suggested to be indicative of stress. These lines have been debunked as non-specific stress indicators since the 1990s and are, instead, associated with growth spurts. I recommend that you simply delete Harris lines from this list.

p. 98: Near the top, “elevated incidence” is mentioned. Please replace “incidence” with “frequency.” Incidence refers to the number of new cases in a specific time frame (usually a year in modern clinical studies) and cannot be reconstructed in archaeological samples.

pp. 104-116: Section 4.3 on Isotope Analysis has no discussion of dietary reconstruction from C and N isotope analyses of Kulubnarti remains, though Turner et al. (2007) is included in the bibliography. This comparative information on diet among contemporaneous Early Christian period remains is far more relevant than much older remains from Kerma and Tombos. It needs to be incorporated here and not just mentioned in passing in relation to O isotopes on p. 131.

p. 126: You cite the poster by Masoner et al. (2011), which you derived from Buzon et al. (2019). Please cite the published abstract for his work. You can also include more recent work in my project area from another AAPA abstract by Gregoricka and Baker (2021) that includes Sr faunal baseline data and values from Kerma period human remains in my project area near al-Qinifab. This research is in preparation for publication and will be submitted this fall.

p. 130: Toward the bottom of the page, an equation said to be provided recently by Chenery and colleagues has a footnote that cites Luz et al. 1984. Please correct.

Ch. IV

This chapter provides a succinct summary of archaeological theory pertaining to mortuary remains. Unfortunately, it lacks more recent work in bioarchaeology on identity (including gender), and embodiment. Theoretical developments in social bioarchaeology should not be ignored and have an impact on interpretations offered in Ch. V. Major works include edited volumes by Agarwal and Glencross (2011), Knudson and Stojanowski (2020), as well as books

by Geller (2017) and Sofaer (2006). See Baker and Agarwal (2017) for a recent open access overview of the field and additional references.

Ch. V

p. 167: You postulate that the female buried in Ghz-3-007 had a privileged status because of the grave architecture, yet that style of grave is the norm in my project area to the west of Abu Hamed.

p. 195: The subheading “Women buried at Cemetery 2?” is somewhat problematic in that it conflates biological sex and gender. Might they have had some alternate gender identity? Also, based on your discussion in this chapter, it seems quite likely that these females had some role in the monastery, perhaps as patrons. I caution here that the role of female leaders (kandake) in the Meroitic period may not have given way immediately to the patriarchy. You provide additional discussion in this section of the role of women, but I urge you to flip this narrative a bit. For example, on p. 206-207, it is stated based on the prior discussion that Nubian women were as economically capable as men, then this idea is overturned by claiming that the only way those with higher status burial obtained their status by connection to a male. Why not consider the possibility that the females were the ones with status in the community and some of the males buried near them in Cemetery 2 may have obtained their position through them? The recognition of daughters, mothers or wives of officials seems not to have come directly from this cemetery but from other sites in Nubia.

Appendix I is fantastic and represents a huge amount of work by itself. I note that many of the burial photos are quite dark and suggest that they be brightened in an image editing program prior to their publication in the Ghazali Cemeteries volume. Appendix II is a table of sites. This catalogue seems comprehensive though I notice that the Qinifab School site is absent despite it being featured in my 2014 piece in the ISNS conference proceedings tome (see reference below).

Summary

This dissertation and the work on which it is based demonstrates the range of Ms. Ciesielska’s accomplishments. The careful archaeological documentation and subsequent analysis of the material culture and human remains is well done. Ms. Ciesielska has demonstrated mastery of an array of literature pertaining to Nubiology, Christianity, archaeological theory related to mortuary practices, the intricacies of biogeochemical analyses, and the analysis of human remains. This massive work is well written in English rather than Polish, a feat that many native English speakers would struggle to accomplish! The treatment of “mortuary remains” as encompassing multiple variables, including the organization of the cemetery, grave architecture and inclusions, and information gleaned from the human remains themselves is refreshing. Too often, the human remains have been divorced from their archaeological context. In this dissertation, Ms. Ciesielska has integrated these aspects and provides comprehensive data that will be a springboard for additional research and publication, as well as comparative material for other investigators. I am very impressed with this dissertation and with Ms. Ciesielska’s persistence to complete this major effort during the COVID-19 pandemic. I strongly recommend award of the Ph.D. based on my review of the dissertation.

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