

**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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Summary:

The main aim of this study is the investigation of post-mortem correlates of social differentiation among the population of medieval Nubia based on mortuary remains at the site of Ghazali in northern Sudan.

Christian funerary sites in the area of medieval Nubian kingdoms are characterised by enormous variability, both in terms of the layout of whole burial grounds, as well as the sole appearance of individual burial units. Despite the commonly accepted concept of egalitarianism of Christian burial practice, material evidence collected in Nubia so far attests to great diversity within the framework of general uniformity. Through multidisciplinary study of material culture and biological characteristics of the deceased, current research scheme aims at uncovering as much as possible about socio-cultural makeup of Nubian society during Christian times, as displayed in funerary record.

Chapter I describes the historical background for the following analysis of material culture. The first section provides for an outline of events directly preceding Christianisation, as well as the turbulent history of medieval Nubia in order to set the stage for further interpretation of archaeological context. Chapter II is devoted to the description of Christian funerary rites in general, along with their ideological premises, which provide a much-needed explanation for many a phenomenon observed in archaeological record. It also recapitulates preceding burial customs, later to be subjected to cultural transformation by new religion, and finally an outline of funerary practice in the Christian period. The third section of this thesis provides a detailed summary of archaeological fieldwork conducted at the cemeteries of Ghazali. Centred around a Christian monastery, whose functioning can be dated between the seventh and thirteenth centuries AD, the site includes four burial grounds. The remains belong to two distinct groups of people, a monastic community residing in the Ghazali monastery and local lay populations buried in the vicinity of the religious establishment. Altogether, more than 100 tombs were excavated and subjected to detailed recording, analysis of human skeletal remains and following laboratory work. Chapter IV contains a theoretical framework for the following analysis of material collected in Ghazali presented in Chapter V. Providing a short historical outline of social archaeology of funerary remains, the section makes headway into the interpretation of Nubian medieval mortuary record in terms of social

diversity. Finally, Chapter V focuses on the analysis of various kinds of data retrieved during archaeological fieldwork in Ghazali at an attempt of identifying patterns of social diversity. A number of statistical tests are applied to the investigation of association between architectural variability and location of interment, both between various cemeteries and within the monastic burial ground, as well as co-occurrence of certain biological features of the deceased. Funerary features uncovered at the site exhibited significant variation in the architectural layout of funerary features. This range of diversity is analysed in the context of burial customs practiced in medieval Nubia, as well as approach to death in Christianity as related by archaeological and written sources. The interpretation of results is provided in the discussion section in Chapter V and following Conclusions.

The goal of research conducted within the framework of this thesis was thus the investigation of various aspects of mortuary record at an attempt of extracting information on social identities of the deceased and socio-cultural makeup of medieval Nubian population. What was demonstrated within the framework of this thesis is the fact that the shape and extent of human intervention towards mortuary treatment in medieval Nubia is defined by multiple factors. Large variability within the outlines set out by religious regulations can be observed. Approach to funerary treatment appears to be very much practical in nature, often determined by local conditions. Resources accessibility draws an economic divide between entire groups of various adaptations and modes of living and thus becomes a correlate of status. The distinction between regular lay populations and the monastic communities translated to differences in mortuary features. As the members of a community, so in a group-wise perspective, the monks enjoyed some advantages stemming from the monastery being an entity participating in the market economy. Furthermore, more elaborate architectural design in association with advantageous location may thus serve as a correlate of social standing. Subtler idiosyncrasies in funerary provisions may partly correspond to both one's social circumstances and human agency.

The analysis of mortuary remains in medieval Ghazali demonstrated limited capacity for social inference, at least on an individual basis. Established links between the characteristics of funerary record seem to be related to one's participation in the market and potential access to resources than any other dimension of social variability. While funerary features demonstrate no consistency in architectural layout nor other characteristics of mortuary treatment, their distinctiveness can be surmised based on the combination of context and other archaeological features: their location within a site, quality of execution and the use of construction materials, as well as bioarchaeological data, such as the demographic profile of the excavated human remains or isotopic analyses of dietary patterns and mobility.

Keywords: nubiology, bioarchaeology, Christianity, Christian archaeology, monasticism, social archaeology, Sudan, Nubia, funerary archaeology, isotopic studies